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MY SISTER THE ACTRESS

FLORENCE MARRYAT

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MY SISTER THE ACTRESS.

A Novel.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT
(MRS. FRANCIS LEAN),
AUTHOR OF 'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' ETC., ETC.

'Honour and shame from no condition rise:
Act well your part: there all the honour lies.'
POPE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.

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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	'AFTER SIX YEARS'	1
II.	'MATTIE IN RAGS'	19
III.	'SHE IS THE RAGE NOW'	36
IV.	'CINTHY IS COMING TO-MORROW!'	49
V.	'SHE IS OLDER THAN I AM'	67
VI.	'SHE CANNOT QUITE FORGET'	89
VII.	'BE TRUE TO YOURSELF'	105
VIII.	'HE KNOWS YOUR ADDRESS'	121
IX.	'I WILL NEVER CEASE TO BE YOUR FRIEND'	144
X.	'I AM IN SUCH A SCRAPE'	165
XI.	'WHAT REWARD SHALL I RECEIVE?'	188
XII.	'WON'T YOU "TRY" TO LOVE ME?'	210
XIII.	'COME!'	234

MY SISTER THE ACTRESS.

CHAPTER I.

'AFTER SIX YEARS.'

In a very few weeks from this period, the Marlborough Theatre closes its doors on the legitimate drama, to reopen them to burlesque; and the actors and actresses who have contrived to render the past season so successful are seen on its boards no more. About the same time, also, sundry paragraphs in the society and theatrical papers inform the public that 'the talented and rising young actress, Miss Betha Selwyn,

who lately delighted the audiences of the Marlborough, has accepted a most lucrative engagement with Mr. Dionysius Parkyn, of the Thespian Theatre, New York, and started from Liverpool for that city, last Saturday, in the steamship *Eldorado.*

And so the girl disappears from England, and is almost forgotten. Some of the more enthusiastic amongst her admirers skim the paragraphs, and exclaim :

'What a shame ! They've actually trapped the little Selwyn over to America ! Why, she was the prettiest actress in London. There is no one to replace her. However, she is sure to be back next season.'

But the months roll on, and Betha does not return ; and somebody springs up to take her place, and the world discovers that somebody is nearly as clever and nearly as pretty as she was, and if her name is ever mentioned it is as a thing of the past.

Theatrical managers and old playgoers miss

the bright speaking face and brighter intellect, and read all the news that reaches England respecting her talents, and follow her American career with interest. But to the general public the name of Betha Selwyn becomes as a dream. The general public is very dull. One-half of it has never seen her, and is not quite sure if she is an author, a singer, or a ballet-girl; and the other half tears through its modicum of daily news at railroad speed, and has no time to spare for the items that relate to foreign theatricals.

Paragraphs detailing the enthusiastic reception of Miss Betha Selwyn as 'Cleopatra,' in New York; or the particulars of her carriage having been dragged home from the theatre after her performance of 'Juliet,' by the young men of Saratoga; or of the diamond bracelet that was thrown to her, concealed in a bouquet of flowers, at Philadelphia, possess but little interest for

the community, and excite but little comment.

The critics and managers read of her success, and say they prophesied as much long ago, and they shall be glad to see her back in England. But Betha Selwyn, having once escaped to the shores of the New World, is like a bird let out of its cage, and sits pluming her wings on the opposite side of the Atlantic, refusing all temptations to cross the 'duck-pond' again. The months grow into years, and one year succeeds another, until six have been numbered with the centuries; and the girl who left England at eighteen is a woman of four-and-twenty. She has played in all the principal cities of America by that time, and her reception everywhere has been crowned with success. She has been pronounced to be the greatest Shakespearian actress that has ever visited the New World; and her 'Rosalind,' and 'Juliet,' and 'Desdemona' are cited as

the most perfect impersonations that have ever been attempted. In fact, making every allowance for the temptation to hyperbole which the appearance of a lovely woman excites in every manly breast, Betha Selwyn *is* a genius, and the general verdict of the public proclaims her so.

As the years pass on, and her popularity becomes more established and her charms more developed, beautiful photographs of her, taken in every conceivable character and position, issue from the world-famed studio of Mora, and find their way into the windows of the Regent Street photographers. At one time the whole front of a certain establishment is monopolised by her portraits, whilst a large placard with the name of Betha Selwyn draws a continuous crowd to gaze upon her attractive face and figure.

Major Durant, who has returned to England with his wife and daughter, stops with the crowd one day, and surveys the specimens

of photography through his double-barrelled eyeglass. He knows quite well who 'Betha Selwyn' is, although he would not have recognised his own child without the assistance of the big placard. He brings Mrs. Durant down that way the very next afternoon, with an injunction to view these terrible proofs of their mutual disgrace, as though they were the portraits of a stranger; but Mrs. Durant is so completely taken aback by the beauty and elegance of the photographs, that she calls out, 'Is that Elizabeth?' from sheer surprise, and is hurried up a by-street by the infuriated major before she has time to examine them. But she comes back in the course of another day or two, accompanied by a tall, slim young lady with dark eyes and hair, and together they look at each portrait separately, with a running commentary of disbelief that Betha could ever have turned out half so beautiful.

'There's no denying it, my dear,' says

Mrs. Durant; 'she's positively lovely, and Colonel Archer was telling me, only yesterday, that she is creating a perfect *furore* in America. Really, I was half tempted to confess we are related; but I thought your papa would never forgive me if I did so. Let me see, Cinthia! How long is it since we have met your poor sister! Is it six years, or seven?'

'It's nearer eight, mamma! It will be eight years next Christmas since our mother died.'

'Dear, dear, so it will be! How time flies! Elizabeth must be nearly four-and-twenty. I think that portrait in the white satin is the most elegant! I should very much like to buy it if I thought your papa would not scold me. And they are actually selling for two shillings a-piece! A shocking price! Why, here is Mr. Claverton! How d'ye do? How d'ye do? we were admiring the portraits of this famous American actress,

Miss Selwyn. Have you seen them, Mr. Claverton? She is really a most distinguished-looking young woman.'

The Honourable Gervase Claverton glances consciously at the photographs and the name as if he had seen both before; but perhaps he thinks it will please Mrs. Durant or her daughter if he professes complete indifference to the pictured beauty.

'Ah, yes!' he replies, somewhat languidly, 'she is rather good-looking, as you say; but if what is reported of her genius the other side of the Atlantic be true, I expect her photograph is all that we shall see of her in England. They tell me she is making a regular fortune out there!'

'Fancy, a regular fortune!' exclaims Mrs. Durant, glancing at Hyacinth, with a heightened colour. The young lady is far the more collected of the two.

'Is Miss Selwyn an Englishwoman?' she asks Mr. Claverton indifferently, as she

buttons her glove; 'has she ever acted in England?'

'I believe she did—years and years ago,' he answers; and then adds, 'Shall we move on, Mrs. Durant? This is hardly a nice crowd for you ladies to be standing in; and it seems to get worse instead of better!'

'Yes, indeed! it is shocking, and I don't know what the major would say if he found us here; but really, Mr. Claverton, if one is ever to see anything in London, we must occasionally put up with a little inconvenience. However, Hyacinth and I have satisfied our curiosity respecting the American beauty, and that is all that we wanted to do.' And so they walk home together to the Durants' house on Primrose Hill.

Later in the day two other ladies pass by the same shop, who are not quite so fearful of being detected in the crime of gazing at Betha's photographs.

'Mamma, mamma! Look there!' cries

the younger of the two, as she twitches at her mother's arm.

'Bless my soul, Blanche! how rough you are growing. You have torn the fringe off my sleeve. What is it? the new cardinal? I saw him last week.'

'No, mamma—*Betha!* Only just look! One, two, three, four—eleven different attitudes! Well, I never! For what on earth are they making such a fuss about her, I wonder!'

'Your cousin Elizabeth, my dear! So it is. This is wonderful! "*Betha Selwyn.*" So that is the name she goes by. I remember now, Professor Leininghem from the college told me a few months ago that she was known in America by the name of Selwyn. Poor girl, poor girl! What a terrible ending! But who would ever have thought she had got so much in her! Come into the shop, Blanche. No one knows she is related to us, and there will be no harm in asking to look over her photographs!'

'You'll have to buy one, mamma.'

'Well, never mind, dear! I shall not grudge even that! I always took an interest in poor Elizabeth. You must remember how kind I was to her after her poor dear mother's death, and how ungratefully she treated me. Well, well, she has had her reward! But we may just as well have a peep at the photographs.'

The ladies are comfortably seated at the counter examining the album which contains Betha's likenesses, when Blanche again tugs at her mother's arm.

'Mamma! isn't that Mr. Frere on the other side of the shop?'

'Where, my dear, where?' exclaims Mrs. Chapman, as she surveys the indicated spot through her *pince-nez*. 'No! surely—that is a much older and better-looking man than Mr. Frere.'

'It is he! I am sure of it! You forget that it is four years since we met him.' And

then Blanche, who is not troubled with any foolish timidity with regard to the other sex, gives a sharp cough, which causes the gentleman in question to raise his eyes. 'How d'ye do, Mr. Frere? I told mamma it was you, but she wouldn't believe me. What an age it is since we met! You never come to see us now. We are not living in Earl's Court any longer, though. We have moved to Shepherd's Bush. And what may *you* be doing here—eh? Are you engaged in selecting pretty faces for your photograph-book? Oh, you naughty man!'

As soon as the young lady's volubility will permit him to answer her questions, Robert Frere does so without any hesitation.

'I was examining these new portraits of your cousin, Miss Chapman. They are beautiful specimens of photography, and I thought I should like to possess one or two, for the sake of "Auld Lang Syne."'

Mrs. Chapman immediately remembers

that she is engaged upon a deed of darkness. She closes the album before her, and lowers her voice.

'Well, Mr. Frere, to tell you the *truth*, we entered for the same purpose, though I should not like anyone else to guess it. Poor, *poor* Elizabeth! But I was always fond of her, you remember. I was her second mother, and regarded her as my own child, and though she sadly disappointed us, and forgot every obligation under which my kindness had laid her—still you know—one cannot *quite* forget these things; and Blanche and I were foolish enough to think we should like to possess one of her photographs in order to note the changes that have taken place in the poor unhappy girl since we parted. But I shall depend upon you not to mention the fact of your having met us here—again!'

Mr. Frere promises obedience, but looks very grave over it the while.

'She is certainly very much changed,' he

says solemnly, as he regards the portraits, 'but I suppose people would say it is for the better. She is very beautiful—but the bright, childish, innocent look, which was one of her greatest charms, has gone for ever.'

'Ah! I expect that did not remain long after she adopted her most pernicious profession. *Who* could be innocent, Mr. Frere, amidst the immoral atmosphere of a life upon the stage! But I believe you have seen her since we have.'

'Yes! I saw her up to within a few days of her leaving England.'

'And she has been absent for six years!'

'She has been absent for six years,' he echoes with a sigh.

'Well! I do not suppose she will ever return to England now; and for her family's sake, it is to be hoped she may not. Poor deluded child! The best thing she can do is to marry and settle in America. Perhaps the stain is not thought so much of there, as

here! And what are *you* doing, Mr. Frere, all this while? How is your excellent grandmamma? And your father, Sir Willoughby?'

'My father's health has not been so good of late, I regret to say, Mrs. Chapman, but Lady Frere seems as strong and as active as ever.'

'And are you living in London?'

'Entirely! I am a junior partner in the firm of MacKinnon and Company, of Leadenhall Street.'

'Bless my soul! this *is* news! Fancy *you* in a city firm!'

'I have worked there for the last seven years, Mrs. Chapman.'

'But what need can you have to work, with Baron's Court and your immense expectations? Mr. Frere, you have quite taken my breath away.'

'I suppose there is no actual *need*. But years ago, Mrs. Chapman, my father and I

fell out on a certain subject, and he held my dependence on him over my head as a threat to make me give up my design. So I determined that I would set to work like other men, and make an independence for myself; and I have done so.'

'And have you accomplished the purpose for which you contended, Mr. Frere?'

The young man's face falls.

'No; and I may never do it: but I shall not relinquish my hope nor my work, all the same.'

'I am afraid you are a very obstinate young man. However, it is time we were moving on. You will come then, and see us at Shepherd's Bush, Mr. Frere? My Blanche has never forgotten the pleasant evenings we used to spend together in Earl's Court. You will be sure to look us up again?'

Mr. Frere promises to obey her commands, and as soon as the ladies are out of sight he

purchases every likeness of Betha that he can lay his hands on, and carries them off to his home in the Strand.

This outburst of photographs proves to be but the forerunner of a series of announcements which appear simultaneously in the London papers, to the effect that Mr. Montgomery Warren, the celebrated Shakespearian actor, and proprietor of the Pompeian theatre, has secured the support of Miss Betha Selwyn for the coming season, and that the price of the stalls will be raised from half a guinea to fifteen shillings in consequence. The various dailies and weeklies seize this opportunity to recapitulate all they have ever heard or published regarding Betha's career. Each character she has sustained in England and America, with the criticisms that appeared on it, is dragged to the front and commented on anew. Her personal characteristics are given in detail. Little anecdotes relating to her benevolence, gene-

rosity, and kindness of heart crop up at every turn ; whilst there are not wanting dark hints, which make Major Durant's blood curdle, respecting her parentage and the reasons which caused her to adopt the stage. Everything, in fact, that can whet the public curiosity, and freshen the public memory regarding Miss Selwyn's professional career, is brought forward to heighten the effect of her re-appearance ; and for a month before she steps on English ground, the journals teem with her name, and her photographs sell faster than they can be reduplicated.

And thus, with a literary blare of trumpets and a nation's welcome, as gratifying and far more flattering to her merits than if she had been a queen, does Betha Durant return to her native land, after six long years of voluntary exile.

CHAPTER II.

'MATTIE IN RAGS.'

WHILST the public interest is still on the tip-toe of expectation concerning her, and the learned in theatrical events are telling each other that she has actually arrived, Betha Durant is standing at the window of an hotel in Piccadilly watching the stream of carriages and foot-passengers that pass in array before her, with almost childish delight.

'Oh, how different everything looks from what it does in America! How good it is to be back again in dear old England!' she exclaims heartily to an old woman who sits sewing in a corner of the room.

The old woman raises her eyes to Betha's bright face and nods in acquiescence. It is Bentham, the nurse, to whose care her dead mother had confided Hyacinth, and who had been turned out of her master's service before the grass had grown green on his wife's grave.

'There are no such carriages as English carriages, and no such horses as English horses,' continues Betha; 'and the girls do look so fresh and sweet and clean—like roses. I do not wonder at that Eastern traveller who wrote the "Cedar of Lebanon" saying, that when he first came to this country he thought he must have entered Paradise, for every woman looked like a houri.'

'And what do you suppose he would have said to yourself, Miss Betha?'

'Oh, I don't know, Benty,' replies the girl with a sudden weariness; 'I am afraid I don't look much like a houri now. I feel as if the American stoves and the hard

work had taken all my roses away. But I used to have a nice colour, used I not, nurse?'

'You are just as good-looking as ever you were, Miss Betha, and in fact a great deal better—colour or no colour,' rejoins the old woman.

Betha laughs at the compliment, which calls an unmistakable bloom into her cheeks. She knows she is handsomer than she ever was, and she is too honest to deny it. As she stands at the window, robed in a plain black velvet dress, with a fall of point lace at her throat and wrists, and no ornament except the masses of her fair hair, she forms a striking picture. Her complexion is certainly pale, but it is as clear as that of a child, and the charm of her delicate rose-tinted lips would be killed by a higher colour. Her large dark-grey eyes are as frank and as earnest in their expression as when she was sixteen; and her *svelte* figure, without losing

any of its grace, has attained a roundness that bespeaks the perfected woman.

As she leans against the window-sill, sheltering herself behind the lace curtain, there is a natural art apparent in every position she assumes: an art which it would have been impossible to cultivate without the natural grace; and a nature which could never have reached the perfection of elegant ease without the assistance of art.

'How sweet, and yet how sad it seems to come home again,' she continues, after a pause. 'Six years is a very long while to have been away, Benty. It looks like a lifetime in the retrospect. And yet we do not seem much changed! *You* don't look a day older, old woman, since that evening—shall I ever forget it?—when you rushed into my room at the Liverpool hotel and asked me to take you to New York with me. What a wonderful meeting that was!'

'The meeting wasn't half so wonderful,

Miss Betha, as the fact of my hearing you were in Liverpool (where I was living with my sister), quite by chance, as you may say. There I was, sad enough, and never dreaming I should see either of my bairns again, when in comes my sister's son with a long story about you; and it seemed to strike me in a moment that it was yourself, and off I went to the hotel and asked to see you. And wasn't my sister surprised when I went back and told her I was going to sail for the Amerikys the very next day!'

'Yes, nurse. I think we arranged the whole business in about an hour, didn't we? Ah, what a comfort you were to me, dear old thing! I was very, *very* sad at that time, Bentham—worse than I ever told you;' and a shadow falls on Betha's face as she speaks.

'Not more than I guessed on, my dear,' replies the nurse, softly.

'I felt as if I had found a mother again

when you came to look after me. It had been all so lonely and strange to me before, and I dreaded going to a new country by myself.'

'Well, you hadn't reason to dread it long, Miss Betha. No lady ever made such a success there as you did, my dear; and it'll be just another when they see you in London. Mr. Warren's man told me yesterday that there's not a seat unbooked for three weeks to come!'

'Oh, you've been getting up a flirtation with Mr. Warren's man already, have you, you sly old thing? You're a terrible flirt, you know, Bentham; and I am afraid your association with the stage has rather demoralised you, for you seem to me to grow worse instead of better.'

The old nurse chuckles at the idea as if it were feasible.

'When you say them sort of things, Miss Betha, your voice reminds me so powerfully

of little Miss Cinthy's—bless her heart, the pretty dear!'

Betha sighs audibly.

'"Little Miss Cinthy" must be a grown-up young lady now, nurse. You forget how time flies. She was eighteen last December! Oh, how I should like to see her, the darling!' —with straining eyes and clasped hands. 'How I should like to meet her! I wonder —I wonder——'

'What now, Miss Betha?'

'If she would learn to love me again, nurse—or if she is still ashamed of me!'

'Ashamed of you, my dear, when the whole town is ringing with your praises, and half the grand folks will be crazy to know you? I warrant you won't have appeared half a dozen times at the theatre before Major and Mrs. Durant will be sitting in the front row and wishing they had bitten out their tongues before they'd been such fools as to quarrel with you.'

'Ah! that woman!' says Betha, with a shudder. 'How I wish I could forget her existence! I feel as if her presence will prevent my ever being friends with my father again, or able to see my dear little sister.'

'You mustn't encourage such feelings, Miss Betha. They're wrong, and six years is time enough to have got the better of them. You may never be called upon to sit down in the same room along of Mrs. Durant; but if you should be, I know you'll do it, for Miss Cinthy's sake.'

'I wonder if Aunt Janie and Blanche are living in London now,' goes on Betha, musingly, 'and if Miss Denny still cultivates elegance at the Princess College. I think I must send you over some day to satisfy my curiosity. It seems so strange to have been away for six years, and not to know what may have happened to one's friends during that interval. Mrs. Henderson and Miss

Montalambert have been my only correspondents, and they are not acquainted with my personal friends. The only *real* change I know of is dear Mr. Henderson's death;' and tears sparkle in Betha's eyes as she thinks of the kind-hearted manager's seat being vacant in the little parlour in the Euston Road.

'Well, my dear, but what personal friends is it as you're thinking of?' demands Nurse Bentham, looking up over her spectacles.

'Oh, several,' replies Betha, hesitatingly. 'I knew lots of people that you've never heard of, Benty. For instance, there was a Mr. Frere, a young gentleman who lived at Baron's Court, in Somersetshire. I should like to know if he is married yet, or single—or—or——'

'Ah, he was one of your sweethearts, I suppose, Miss Betha; and you're curious to hear if he's forgot you, my dear! You was n love with him, *I* guess.'

The girl reddens furiously, although she laughs at the same time.

'Don't say "*I* guess," you horrible old Yankee! No; I wasn't in love with him—not a bit, but he was very kind and good to me, and—I liked him, and should be pleased to hear that he is well and happy.'

'You'll hear of 'em all in good time, Miss Betha, never fear! You forget you've only been in England a couple of days, and half your friends don't even know as you've arrived.'

At that moment a waiter enters to ask if Miss Selwyn will receive Mrs. Henderson.

'Oh, yes, yes!' cries Betha, eagerly; 'ask the lady up at once;' and in another minute she is crying over and kissing the manager's poor little widow, who looks half her usual size, clad in the sable trappings of woe.

'Oh, my dear, *dear* Betha!' she sobs; 'if poor papa had only lived to see this day! He used to be so proud of you, my dear, and

so anxious to see you again; and almost the last words that passed his poor lips were to ask me to read out what the New York papers said of your "Imogen." And here he's been buried over four months, and I'm just lost without him.'

'I am sure you are,' says Betha; 'and I cannot tell you how much I feel his death too, Mrs. Henderson. It seems to spoil all the pleasure of coming back to England to think that he is not here to welcome me.'

'Ah, and he *would* have welcomed you, my dear! You have been his first thought the whole time you've been away, and often he frightened me by declaring that he'd follow you to America. He was so proud of you, Betha! He used to say there had never been an actress like you since Rachel. And it was papa that induced Mr. Warren to engage you for this season. I can see him now, sitting up in bed, poor dear, and saying, "Go to *any* sum, Warren—any sum,

so that you secure the Selwyn" (he always called you "*the* Selwyn," you know, my dear); "she'll make your fortune."'

'Dear papa!' falters Betha. 'He always thought too well of me.'

'No; he couldn't do *that*, my dear; but he was so proud, poor fellow, to think he had been the one to discover your talent, and bring it forward. If he could only have lived to see your *début* at the "Pompeian" next Monday I think he would have died happy. But there; it's no use talking. It was not to be! He's gone, and I don't care how soon I follow him. But now let me sit down and have a look at you, my dear. Well, you *are* improved! I should hardly have known you for the same girl that used to play at the poor old Marlborough. Let me see; what was the last part you played there the night before you were taken so ill —"Lady Teazle," wasn't it?'

'Yes, yes!' says Betha, quickly. 'But

don't let us talk of it, Mrs. Henderson. I can't forget how kind dear papa was to me on that occasion. Do you ever see anything of the old faces now? Mr. Fellowes, and Charley Lawson, and poor Fanny Price, whom I used to snub so terribly? Are they in town, or in the country?'

'I am sure I can't tell you, my dear. You know how little I mixed with any of the theatre people. They've left the Marlborough long ago; of that I'm sure, but I never took the trouble to ask poor papa what had become of them. I met one of your friends though, Betha, a few months ago—though she's not fit to be called a friend of yours—but you'll never guess who I mean.'

'It is so difficult to remember names at this distance of time. It wasn't my aunt, Mrs. Chapman, Mrs. Henderson, was it? or —or—my father's wife?'

'Oh no, my dear, neither—though I shouldn't know them if I *did* meet them.

It was that dreadful woman Mrs. Levison, or whatever she may call herself.'

Betha's heart gives a big jump.

'*Mattie Levison!* What was she doing, Mrs. Henderson? Surely she did not speak to you?'

'*Speak to me*, Betha! I should rather think not! All her desire seemed, poor creature, to shuffle out of my way. But you never saw such an object in your life, my dear, so ragged and dirty. I took her for a beggar until she raised her eyes to mine.'

'*Mattie in rags!*' exclaims Betha, as her thoughts fly back to the ruby velvet hats, the Russian sable trimmings, and the costly laces. 'Oh, Mrs. Henderson, you must have been mistaken in her! It was a chance resemblance, perhaps. It never could have been *Mattie* that you saw.'

'My dear, it was Mrs. Levison and nobody else.'

'But *in rags!*' repeats Betha, still horror-

struck, 'when her father and husband are so rich, and—and——'

But even now she cannot bring herself to speak the name of Geoffrey Clifford.

'Why, her husband's married again, my dear. He got a divorce six months after, and married one of Lord Coote's daughters. It was a splendid wedding. The papers were full of it. And her father, Mr. Kemyss, failed, you know. I remember poor papa telling me all about it; and I think he died not long after, so it's not likely she'd get help from either of them. But that Clifford must have been a mean hound to desert her! I never liked Clifford, Betha. He had such a shifty look in his eyes. The woman must have been a fool to trust herself to him.'

'Mattie in rags!' repeats Betha, as she gazes before her with eyes swimming in tears. 'Poor, pretty Mattie! To what horrible depths can she have fallen?'

'The less said about that, my dear, the

better; but I knew you would be astonished to hear it. It gave *me* a turn I can tell you; though I never liked her any better than I did Clifford. They were well matched. But now, Betha, when are you coming to see me? It will be a sad pleasure to see you sitting in your old chair again, my dear, though poor papa will be very present to us both the while. Can you come and have a bit of roast mutton with me on Sunday?'

'Yes, dear old friend, I will keep Sunday for you alone. You have the very first claim upon me.'

'Oh, if he could only have lived to see you play next Monday!' exclaims the poor little widow with a final burst of tears as she embraces Betha, and takes her departure.

But the girl stands where she has left her for some time longer, gazing thoughtfully upon the stream of life that rolls past below, especially on that portion of it that is shabby

and slouching and unclean; what is the thought that makes her breast heave, and her eyes fill, and her lips tremble, as she surveys the stranger crowd?

Is it the remembrance of Geoffrey Clifford?

No; Betha is thinking of a fair face with the tinge of rose-leaves on it, of a pair of melting black eyes, of dark rippling tresses, and a sweet, soft voice that at one time uttered nothing but kindliness for her.

'Mattie in rags!' she whispers over and over again to herself. '*I*—here—and poor, poor Mattie—in rags!'

CHAPTER III.

'SHE IS THE RAGE NOW.'

THE play in which Mr. Montgomery Warren has decided that Betha Selwyn shall make her first appearance at the Pompeian Theatre is 'As You Like It,' and on the night of its production the house is crowded from pit to gallery. The critics, the managers, and the leaders of fashion all press to welcome the actress whose fame has reached them across the Atlantic, and the general verdict is, that the fame is well deserved.

As Betha appears before them with all the archness and vivacity of a true Rosalind, combined with her perfect elocution and her

beauty of face and figure, the audience rises *en masse* to greet her, and it is many minutes before she can do else than bow her acknowledgments for the compliment she has received.

But as scene follows scene, and she rises like a true artist to the work before her, the favourable impression she has made gains ground, and there is but one opinion concerning the greatness of her talent. The English stage has gained a genius. She left them as a promising child—she has returned a perfected artist. Six years of unremitting study and practice have brought her literally to the top of the tree, and from the moment she steps on the stage of the Pompeian, Betha Selwyn's name in England is made.

Of course she has her detractors—who has not? Envy, a love of dissension, and a desire to assume fearlessness in their opinions, induce several journals to differ from the majority, but the majority win the day.

Where one carping critic declares that her voice is too weak to be heard in the tenderer passages, four insist that the delicate modulation of her tones, which render a whisper as distinct as the most declamatory speeches, is one of the greatest charms the new actress possesses.

And whilst two or three petty papers, who hope to raise a discussion in order to increase their sale, assert that her conception of Rosalind's character is entirely wrong, the best journals decide that she has given the world the most original and most delicately handled reading of that character that it has ever witnessed.

Whether they differ, however, or whether they agree, the result remains the same—all London rings with the name of Betha Selwyn, and little else is talked or thought of but her dresses, her appearance, and her acting.

Before she has been a week on the London stage she is summoned to the Royal

Box to be personally introduced to, and to receive the congratulations of, the highest personages of the realm; after which, of course, the rest comes easy. Ladies of rank and title vie with each other to secure the presence of the famous Miss Selwyn at their supper-parties and their Sunday dinners; and the whispers circulate, and the rumours spread, until her name begins to be linked with those of various members of the aristocracy, and the society papers throw out mysterious hints about 'the accomplished Miss S——' and the 'Duke of ——,' or 'a certain well-known and justly celebrated actress' and 'a gallant Colonel in the Guards, youngest son of the late Earl of C——.'

Betha reads out these paragraphs to Bentham over the breakfast-table, and laughs heartily at the flimsy foundations she can trace for their publication; but the old nurse is indignant at such a liberty being taken with her young lady's name, and wants Betha

to write to each paper separately, and deny the report.

'Why, all the years we was in the Amerikys, Miss Betha, they never dared to handle your name in that fashion, and I'm sure they've impudence enough for anything over there. But to say that you're going to marry Lord Canterbury, when his lordship only handed you to your carriage once, and isn't above eighteen years old at the outside, is a presumption I wouldn't put up with if I was you. You should write at once and give them the lie, my dear; and tell them you'll have them up for libel if ever they do such a thing again!'

'Ah, nurse! it's all very well talking; but so long as they mention no names, there's no remedy for it. It's vulgar, and it's annoying, but no one suffers so much as themselves for trying to make stock out of private affairs that do not concern them. They will suffer for it some day. They will go rather farther

than they intended, or take liberties with the name of some one more pugnaciously inclined than the majority, and then they will be brought to book for their conduct, and England will be purged of her latest piece of snobbery. It is bad enough, as you say, in America, but somehow it sits better on them than it does on us. An old conservative nation should respect the sanctity of its private homes too much, to rudely pull open the doors, until their owners have unbolted them from the inside.'

But publicity is the penalty of popularity, and Betha is compelled to read her name in print each time she takes up a newspaper, and to feel that the world and the journalists know a great deal more about her than she does herself. But though she professes to complain, she enjoys it all. Every servant of the public does. She smiles, whilst she frowns to see the portraits of her that are published (some of them gross caricatures) in

the pictorial papers; or to hear the whisper, '*That is she—that is Miss Selwyn!*' wherever she appears amongst her fellow-men. Marvellous anecdotes are told of her wealth and her luxurious mode of living, whilst the truth is, that she continues to reside with old Bentham at the hotel where she first took up her residence, leading as regular and quiet a life as her avocations will admit of, receiving few visitors, and taking her daily airings in a modest little brougham which is generally directed to be driven to Hendon or Hampstead, or anywhere out of the breath of London. But all the reports concerning her, and the fuss the fashionable world is making over her, naturally reach the ears of her relations, and cause them to wish at times, as the old nurse predicted, that they had not been in quite such a hurry to cut her adrift from their society. Major Durant reads the daily papers with a frown, which is not lessened by his wife's constant insinuations as

to what their friends are thinking of the attitude they have adopted in the matter.

'Really, James!' she says, 'the situation is becoming exceedingly awkward. Only fancy! Lord Desborough is perfectly aware that Elizabeth's real name is Durant, and asked me yesterday if she was not connected with our family! Of course I waived the subject, but I am sure he must have thought my manner strange. And I have had to refuse the dance at Lady Moberley's next Saturday, which Hyacinth was so anxious to attend, because her ladyship wrote to tell me, as a great inducement, that Miss Betha Selwyn had promised to be with them by supper-time that evening, and we must not miss the opportunity of meeting her! Really, James, the whole of the town seems talking of that girl, and rushing to get an introduction. We shall be the only people soon who do not know her.'

'Well, I can't help that, my dear,' replies

the major, testily. 'It was by your own desire that I did not receive her back into my house, and matters have gone too far to be altered now.'

'Yes,' admits Mrs. Durant, reluctantly; 'when she first ran away to her aunt's in that absurd fashion, and said all sorts of things against me, it was only natural that I should object to her presence here. But *now*, James, it is quite a different thing. She is the rage now, you know; she has made a name for herself, and everybody is running after her—and it will look so very strange, if the truth should ever come out, that *we* should have been the only ones to hold back.'

'What do you want me to do?' exclaims her husband. 'Go and ask my own daughter's pardon! Elizabeth has got a stiff back, I can tell you. She is her mother over again, and won't forgive old injuries in a hurry.'

'Don't you think if *I* were to go and see her I might put matters straight between us,

James? Elizabeth was always attached to her sister, I believe; and to see Hyacinth again, may prove a powerful inducement to her to overlook the past.'

'Well, if you've set your heart upon it, and Elizabeth is willing to come backward and forward to the house, I suppose I shall have to put the best face I can upon the matter,' grumbles the major; 'but mind, Maria, I won't have any pardons asked or granted. She went of her own accord, and she may come back of her own accord; but I won't have her presence here conferred upon us as a favour, and that you must make her understand from the beginning.'

'Oh, my dear James! as if I should compromise your good name in that fashion. Leave it to me, and I will arrange matters in the most natural manner possible! And for dear Hyacinth's sake, I really think it desirable this little feud should be made up. People will think it so very strange, if the

truth were known; and Elizabeth was never very reticently inclined, I remember. Lord Desborough is so very particular, too. I heard him say only the other day that he could forgive anything but deceit. And if that match were broken off now, it would break all our hearts.'

'Are you quite sure that acknowledging our connection with Elizabeth will not have a hand in breaking it off?'

'Oh no, James! Lord Desborough is one of her most ardent admirers. He is always praising her for her excellent qualities off the stage, and saying how proud he should be to own her as a friend. And, indeed—I may as well tell you the truth, James—his lordship actually knows that Elizabeth is your daughter, and I have been compelled to confess the truth to him. And it is in consequence of what he said on that occasion that I urge you to let me call upon her and make up this little family difference. Indeed, if

we do not do so, I fear our conduct may have some bad effect upon Lord Desborough's intentions with regard to Hyacinth.'

'That entirely alters the case,' says the major. 'Why couldn't you tell me that at first? You women have such an extraordinary roundabout way of stating a matter. Of course, if Desborough thinks it right, you must go and call on Elizabeth. When will you go—this afternoon? and shall you take Hyacinth with you, or leave her at home?'

'I do not think I will take her with me to-day,' replies Mrs. Durant. Elizabeth is rather proud, if I remember rightly; and it will take a little manœuvring, perhaps, to bring her round. The prospect of meeting her sister again will be a great inducement for her to come to our house, and having once entered it, she can have no reasonable excuse for not coming again. No, I shall not take Hyacinth this time.'

'You're a deuced clever woman, my dear, or you would not have taken me in so quickly as you did,' says the major, divided between admiration for his wife and himself. 'Have your own way in the matter, and do as you think best; only give me a little time to prepare myself before I meet this celebrated daughter of mine again, for, by Jove, Maria, I believe I am more frightened of her than she will be of me!'

And so it comes to pass, that a few hours later, as Betha, having returned from her afternoon drive, is sitting alone in her private room, a card is brought up to her bearing the name of 'Mrs. Durant.'

CHAPTER IV.

'CINTHY IS COMING TO-MORROW!'

HER first impulse is to say that she is not at home. Although eight years have passed since she stood by her mother's dying couch and heard her exclaim, 'Take that woman away. It is she that has killed me!' Betha has not yet learned to think of the quondam Mrs. Wallerton without horror.

The truth is clearer to her now than it was as a child, when she used to wonder if the widow had mixed poison with her mother's food, or personally thrust her out into that cold, frosty atmosphere that proved her

death. She has understood for some time past that it was her father's evident predilection for the flirting widow that provoked the grievous quarrel that induced her ailing mother to leave her home; but she can hardly forgive her more easily for the one fact than the other. If it had not been for Mrs. Wallerton, she might still have had a mother — that is the paramount idea in Betha's mind whenever she hears the name of her father's wife; and for the first moment she feels as if she *could* not see her, but the next brings with it a thought of Hyacinth.

Hyacinth, her mother's favourite and cherished child, may be standing at the door for admittance! Can she deny it to her? 'Betha, take care of Cinthy; be a mother to her! Try and supply my place. Don't let her miss me!' The last faint words vibrate on her memory. After all these years, has she the right, can she have the

heart, not to receive her own dear sister, by whomsoever she may be accompanied?

Her thoughts have occupied more than a page in the transcription, but they pass through her brain like wild-fire.

'Ask Mrs. Durant to walk upstairs,' she says, with a gasp, to the servant; and then she stands on the hearthrug, proud and pale, but with the light of expectation in her eye.

As her step-mother enters the room it fades. Mrs. Durant is alone, though wreathed in smiles.

'My dear Elizabeth,' she says, with outstretched hands, 'are *we*, of all London, not to be your friends?'

'Did—did my father send you here?' demands the girl, without altering her position.

'Certainly he did! Do you think I would come without his knowledge? He would have accompanied me, had he not thought I

had better see you first alone. Come, Elizabeth! We know that certain sad circumstances parted your dear papa and yourself, but, for Hyacinth's sake, you must not keep up the feud any longer. You cannot imagine how anxious she is to meet you again.'

'There was no *feud*,' repeats Betha, with trembling lips. 'My father thrust me from his doors for *your* sake, Mrs. Durant; and now that I have made an independence, and trouble no one, don't you think it would be better, for the peace of all of us, to leave me to myself?'

Mrs. Durant looks discomfited, for all this time Betha has not advanced one step in order to take her hand. Yet she will not give up the attack.

'No—no—no, my dear Elizabeth! I cannot have you talk in that way. Now, let us look at the affair in a reasonable light. You were a very naughty girl in those, days, you know, there's no denying it

—a regular young rebel; and your papa—well, perhaps he was harsher than he need have been, and——'

'And he preferred you to his children and his wife. Let us speak plainly to each other, Mrs. Durant. If we are to have any communication in the future, it must be fair and above-board.'

'Very true, my dear—I desire nothing better. Let us acknowledge, then, for the sake of argument, that your papa *did* at one time have the bad taste you allude to; you may be sure it is all over now. Seven years of married life, my dear Elizabeth, is sufficient punishment for the sins of one's deadliest enemy. And I was never *that* to you, you know!'

'No, you were never that to me,' repeats the girl mechanically, as she begins to wonder if she may not have judged the woman before her too harshly, after all.

'All that is past and over,' continues Mrs.

Durant,' and the question now is, whether the estrangement which followed it is to last for ever. For your father's and your sister's sake I think it should not. They are both willing and anxious to see you again——'

'Now that I am no longer a disgrace to them,' interposes Betha, with a heaving breast.

'Now, my dear, that is very naughty of you, and very unkind. Of course your papa was nettled at your going on the stage—any father would have been—and he is proud that you have succeeded so well.'

'But he never sent you to me until I *had* succeeded,' says Betha.

'My dear, how could he? You were in America.'

The girl is silenced.

'However, he is very anxious to see you in his house again now. We are still living on Primrose Hill, and Hyacinth is just crazy to get her sister back. You would not know

Hyacinth, Elizabeth, she is such a fine girl—five feet seven in height, and considered very handsome. She looks as old as you do; but then she is dark, you know, and fair people always wear the best. However, I am sure you will be pleased with her appearance and her manners.'

As Mrs. Durant is speaking, a vision rises before Betha's mental sight of curly locks and dark eyes, and an impudent little face leaning over the banisters; and a great yearning, which has never slept, stirs in her breast to see again the little sister who, for eight long years, has only come to her in her dreams.

'I am sure I shall be pleased with her, my dear—dear Cinthy! and for *her* sake——'

'You will consent to become one of us again!' says Mrs. Durant, advancing to the hearthrug. 'My dear girl, I am so glad to hear you say so! This is as it ought to be!' and as she concludes, the lady bends forward and kisses Betha's face. She starts, and

draws herself quickly backward. She cannot yet bring herself to kiss the woman who stands in her mother's place. But the action arouses her to some sense of hospitality.

'Are you standing all this while?' she says. 'Pray forgive me, Mrs. Durant, and sit down, and let me order you a cup of tea! And how is my father after all these years? Does he keep his health and his appearance?'

'Yes, my dear; the major (except for an occasional touch of liver, which renders his temper rather trying) is remarkably well, and as often taken for Hyacinth's brother as her father. And *you* are vastly improved, Elizabeth. We hardly recognised your photographs, although they are striking likenesses.'

'Yes, I believe I have improved,' the girl answers simply, 'in looks as well as in acting. Have you been to the "Pompeian" yet, Mrs. Durant?'

'Yes, once. Of course we were anxious

and eager to see you after so long an absence —but theatre-going is an expensive luxury, Elizabeth, and though we are not poor, we cannot call ourselves in affluent circumstances.'

'I will send you some orders,' says Betha, 'if you will let me know which night will be most convenient to you.'

'But, my dear, you must not talk of *sending*—you must *bring* them to us. Now, let me see; when can you spare us a day? Think how impatient your papa must be to see you again.'

'I will go to see you any afternoon you like,' replies Betha, smiling at the idea of her father's impatience, 'on one condition, Mrs. Durant, that you let my sister come and visit me here first. I dare say I shall be glad myself when this bitter estrangement is over, but there must needs be a little constraint between us at the beginning: and Hyacinth is my own sister, you see—we had

but one mother between us—she seems to belong so much more to me than to either you or papa, that I should wish to meet her, here and alone, before I re-enter my father's house.'

Mrs. Durant is disappointed. She would have liked to carry back Betha triumphantly that very afternoon — but she is fain to yield.

'Of course, if you wish it,' she answers. 'I am sure the major would desire to please you in every way. If, therefore, I send your sister to you to-morrow morning, will you return with her and lunch at Primrose Hill?'

'Certainly—gladly!' exclaims Betha, whose eyes are already dancing with the hope of clasping her dear sister in her arms again.

The tea is now brought in, and the two women sit down together and become more sociable over it. After all, eight years is a long time for which to cherish animosity for

a fancied wrong, and after a little while the old charm of Mrs. Durant's manner begins to work upon Betha's ardent nature, and she is ready to call herself names for being hard-hearted, suspicious, and unjust.

Even at this period Mrs. Durant is a very handsome woman, and youthful in appearance. Her age does not exceed forty, and she has a dozen little contrivances by which to make herself look quite ten years younger. Her dress is in good taste, though rather showy, and taken altogether, she is not a connection to be ashamed of. When she draws closer to Betha too, and begs her, in a low voice, with just a suspicion of tears in it, not to judge her too hardly for what is past, but to remember there are two sides to every question, and if she were guilty of an indiscretion, she has long ago mourned over and repented it, the girl feels half ashamed of herself, and begs her stepmother not to mention the subject again. Upon which

they turn to brighter subjects, and grow discursive after the manner of women; and whilst Mrs. Durant lauds Betha to the skies for the excellence of her acting, and repeats all the compliments she has heard thereon, Betha admires her visitor's dress and bonnet, and asks a hundred questions respecting Hyacinth, and other relatives of the family.

Their conversation is interrupted at last by the appearance of old Bentham, who is not aware that her young lady is engaged, and stares with all her eyes when she recognises the visitor at the tea-table.

'Oh, here is dear old Benty!' exclaims Betha, jumping up. 'You must remember Bentham, Mrs. Durant; she was my moth—— I mean,' she continues, recovering herself with a gasp, 'she was my sister's nurse and mine, almost from our births; and she went out with me to America, and took care of me the whole time I was there!'

'Indeed, I remember Mrs. Bentham very

well, and I am glad to renew my acquaintance with her,' replies Mrs. Durant graciously, as she tenders her hand for the old servant's acceptance.

'And oh, Benty, only fancy!' cries Betha; 'Cinthy is coming to see us to-morrow morning!'

'My blessed bairn!' exclaims the nurse, with sparkling eyes; 'it will be a pleasure to see her bonnie face again! Why, Miss Betha, you look ten years younger for the very thought!'

'I don't think Miss Betha requires to look ten years younger for anything, Bentham!' says Mrs. Durant. 'I have just been telling her that Miss Hyacinth looks as old as she does.'

'Does she now? bless her dear heart! Perhaps it's the trouble of their separation that's done it,' says Bentham, indiscreetly.

'I fancy it is more due to her personal characteristics,' rejoins Mrs. Durant, some-

what tartly, and then she rises and shakes out her plumage. 'Well then, Elizabeth, we shall expect you to luncheon at two o'clock to-morrow, and I hope the first time may not be the last.'

'And Cinthy is to come to me in the morning.'

'Hyacinth shall be with you by eleven punctually, and I trust the meeting will be a mutual pleasure. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Bentham! No, don't trouble yourself to open the door for me! I shall always be pleased to see you in the servants'-hall, you know, when you may choose to come, and you can see your nurseling, Miss Hyacinth, whenever you feel inclined!'

'Here's a change!' exclaims the old servant, as Mrs. Durant's silk dress rustles downstairs; '*me* to be asked to go and come as I choose to the servants'-'all, when the master put me out almost with his own hands.'

'Oh, we mustn't think of that now, nursie,' says Betha; 'we must forgive and forget. It's the right thing to do, isn't it? And I really think she intends to be very kind to both of us. And Cinthy is coming to-morrow morning at eleven! Only fancy that, Benthy! our darling little Cinthy whom we used to spoil so terribly! I feel as if I could never be glad enough to think I am to see and speak with her again. But she isn't a baby any longer, nurse! Mrs. Durant says she is much taller than I am—five feet seven—only imagine! and quite a young woman of fashion, I suppose!'

'I warrant you are the biggest child of the two, Miss Betha; and will remain so to your life's end! Miss Cinthy was always a little woman in her ways and words.'

'Oh, I shall love her much better as a woman, Benthy. The darling! She will tell me all her secrets and little love-affairs, and she will come to me for advice and sym-

pathy, and feel almost as if she had found her mother again. I mean to be like a mother to her, nurse. To teach her to regard me as her friend and counsellor, and to help her to avoid the traps I have fallen into!' And here Betha heaves a deep sigh. 'For life is full of temptations for a young innocent girl, Bentham; but my Cinthy shall never fall into them whilst her sister is able to shield her from them.'

'Maybe Miss Cinthy will know as much about traps and temptations as *you* do, Miss Betha.'

'Oh, nurse! how should she? My Cinthy! why, she is only just eighteen! I dare say she has never thought about love yet, or lovers, or any such nonsense! She must be fresh from school! She has not been thrown upon the world from a mere girl, as I have.'

'Yet *you* have kept clear of such things, Miss Betha! haven't you?'

'I— ? Oh yes, Benty!' is the stammering reply; 'you know I have. I expect it would be rather difficult to have a lover without *your* finding it out, you sly old thing! You are always poking your nose into my private affairs! But now I'll tell you what you must do for me. As soon as I have gone to the theatre to-night, you must take a cab and drive to those jewellers we called on in Bond Street yesterday, and tell them to sent one of their men here to-morrow morning without fail, with a selection of their prettiest bracelets for me to choose from. I must give my darling sister something *very nice* in remembrance of the day on which we meet again.'

'Bracelets, Miss Betha? But what sort, and at what price?'

'Oh, I don't know! the best they have. Do you think I am going to stick at a few pounds for my Cinthy? Say it is for a young lady; and it may cost twenty, thirty,

forty, fifty!—yes, I don't care if it costs *a hundred* pounds, so long as it's handsome and good, and worthy of her! Handsome and good, like my sweet, darling sister! My precious Cinthy! God bless her!'

CHAPTER V.

'SHE IS OLDER THAN I AM.'

THE next morning is a bright May day, warm, sunny, and perfumed; and long before the hands of the clock point to eleven, Betha is pacing up and down her private sitting-room, with her cheeks and her heart on fire, as she thinks of the meeting before her.

'I expect you'll look the younger of the two this morning, Miss Betha,' remarks Bentham, as she carries in her young mistress's coffee. 'Why, in that white dress, with your hair hanging down your back, I declare you don't look one day over seventeen!'

'*Do* I look young?' cries Betha. 'Oh, nurse, if you only knew how old my heart feels! To have been separated from her for so many years—not to be sure if I shall recognise her even when we do meet—it is exciting me so, I shall have no rest until I have heard her dear voice say that the past troubles will make no difference in our sisterly affection.'

'Lor, my dear, you'll hear her say it soon enough! What else should she say, bless her! But now you had better let me plait up your hair whilst you take your coffee.'

'What does it signify? What will Cinthy care how my hair looks? And my head aches, nurse. I would rather you left it alone. Oh, how slowly the time goes! Surely it must be more than half-past ten? If anything happens to prevent her coming, I shall go crazy!'

'Nothing will happen to prevent it, Miss Betha. Mrs. Durant will send her sure

enough! She is too anxious to make it up with you to fail of her promise. They're mighty proud of you all of a sudden, my dear! I told you it would be so! Now that all London is raving about you, and princes and princesses of the blood royal have shaken you by the hand, they've found out that you'll be an ornament and an attraction at Primrose Hill. And so you will, Miss Betha; and I hope you'll hold your head high, for you've every call to do so, and not let yourself be imposed upon by Mrs. Durant, nor the major, nor any of 'em.'

'Oh, Benty, how *nasty* you are this morning! One would think you wanted to put me out of temper just as my dear Cinthy is coming! Hush, didn't something stop at the door just now? Quick, nurse! look and see!'

'Only a hansom, my dear!' replies the old woman, peering through the lace curtains; 'and that won't be Miss Hyacinth, take my word!

Mrs. Durant would never send a young lady by herself tearing about in a hansom to a public hotel at this time of day.'

'She will come in the carriage, of course,' says Betha.

But at this moment the door is opened, and before the waiter can announce the visitor's name, a young lady, robed from head to foot in a costume of the palest French pink cashmere, thrusts herself forward and enters the room.

She is a most wonderful young lady to look at; very pretty and very fashionable: with an eel-skin dress that fits her figure like a glove—a profusion of dark curls over her brow—more than a suspicion of pearl powder on her face—and a patch of black plaister under her left eye to increase the delicacy of her complexion and the brilliancy of her glance.

At her appearance, Betha rises in confusion, hardly knowing what to say or do, until

the other sets all her doubts at rest by exclaiming:

'Why, Betha! I should have known you anywhere!'

'Is it Cinthy?' says Betha, rushing forward; and then she takes the tall young lady in her arms, and laughs and cries over her by turns, repeating: 'My little Cinthy! My darling little sister! How glad I am to see you again!'

For although three good inches taller than herself, Hyacinth is still 'little Cinthy' to her loving sister, and will remain so until her own tongue has disabused her of the idea.

Miss Hyacinth returns the kisses vehemently, but when at last they separate, and stand side by side upon the hearthrug, there are no tears in her eyes to correspond to those in Betha's.

'Oh, Cinthy! how you have grown!' exclaims the elder sister, as she looks upward

smiling. 'What a woman you have become! I never should have recognised you had we met in the street.'

'I rather fancy not,' replies Hyacinth, in a high, determined tone; 'but did you expect I should stand still? I have been "*out*" two years already, Betha! Mamma says she doesn't see the good of keeping girls in the nursery too long.'

'Besides, you must be such a companion for her,' replies Betha. 'But don't you know Bentham, Cinthy? Dear old Bentham, who brought you up from a baby.'

'Bless my soul!' cries the younger girl, putting up an eyeglass; 'is that Benty? Why, where have you cropped up from, nurse? I thought you were dead and buried years ago.'

'And are not you going to give her a kiss?' says Betha, with a disappointed air.

'All in good time, my dear,' replies Hyacinth, as she salutes the old nurse hastily on

the forehead. 'Are you as surprised as Betha to find me such a big child, Benty? You look as if your eyes were tumbling out of your head.'

'Well, I *am* surprised, Miss Cinthy, and no mistake. Mrs. Durant was quite right to say you looked the older of the two. Why, Miss Betha here is a baby beside you!'

'A nice baby, to have the whole town running after her, and to be invited into the royal box to receive compliments! I should like to be that sort of baby very much, Mrs. Bentham. And oh, Betha, I wanted to ask you about that. Is it true what I read in the "Upper Circles" that the prince told you he had never seen such acting on the English stage before, and did the Duke of Canterbury send you a gold bracelet with your name on it in diamonds?'

'Yes, darling; it is true.'

'How lovely! How jolly it must be to be an actress! I never thought it was half

so nice. Mamma set me against it so much, you know, and told me you had disgraced us all. I never dared mention your name at one time. "My sister the actress" was a forbidden topic. It was all mamma's fault, though. I don't think papa would have been half so bad except for her. But she is singing to a very different tune now. I heard her telling Lady Onslow last night that "her daughter, the celebrated Miss Selwyn," was coming to luncheon to-day. Such humbug, isn't it? But it's all right so long as you *do* come.'

'Then you are glad to meet me again, dear Cinthy?'

'Of course I am. It was most awkward having to shirk mentioning your name; and people would sidle up to me when mamma's back was turned, and ask, in a whisper, if I had not a sister on the stage. I hated it!'

'Poor darling! What trouble I have brought on you!' sighs Betha.

'Oh, it's no matter now, Betha. We shall see each other as much as we like. And I mean to go to the theatre so often and see you act. I think you do it beautifully—it makes me cry! Papa's so stingy, I shouldn't get him to go; but he lets Lord Desborough take me wherever I choose; and Desborough admires you as much as I do.'

'And who is Lord Desborough, dear—an old friend of yours?'

'Yes; pretty well. I'll tell you by-and-by,' says Hyacinth, mysteriously; and then, raising her voice, she adds to Bentham: 'I say, old lady, couldn't you toddle out of the room and leave Betha and me to ourselves for a bit?'

'Oh, Cinthy!' commences Betha, in remonstrance, but the nurse stops her.

'I ought to have gone before, Miss Betha. It was foolish of me not to remember how many things your sister and you must have to say to each other after such a long sepa-

ration. Let me give you one more kiss, my bonnie bairn,' she continues, as she looks into Hyacinth's laughing face. 'Well, you *are* a beauty, and no mistake, though there's no look of your dear mamma in you. It's Miss Betha as favours her;' and with that Bentham salutes her nursling, and leaves the room.

'What a bore old servants are!' says Hyacinth, as she rises and looks in the glass, and daintily touches her face with her cambric handkerchief. 'I hate all that kissing and pawing—don't you, Betha?'

'Old Bentham has been so very kind to me, Cinthy, that I can't hate anything she does. But now that we are alone, dear, tell me about this Lord Desborough. Is he young or old?'

'Oh, young—about thirty, I suppose.'

'And nice?'

Hyacinth shrugs her shoulders.

'*Assez bien!*'

'Surely, Cinthy, it is not *a case*. My little sister has not begun to think of admirers yet, has she?'

Cinthy does not blush, but she looks uneasy, and laughs.

'If you mean by that to ask me if I'm *in love* with Desborough, Betha, I can answer decidedly *no!* But I am engaged to him.'

'*What!*' cries the elder sister, in an incredulous tone.

'I am engaged to be married to him,' repeats Cinthy, carelessly, 'and I believe it is considered an excellent match. At least, mamma is always drumming into my ears how grateful I ought to be to Providence, and all that sort of rubbish! But he's an awful frump, and I'm sure I don't know how I shall ever get on with him.'

Betha's eyes dilate with horror. Something in Hyacinth's tone recalls so palpably to her mind the conversation she held with Mattie Kemyss, years ago, on the subject of

her proposed marriage with Mr. Levison. There is the same heartless ring in both the girls' voices—the same careless indifference when alluding to their want of affection for their future husbands. And though her sister sits beside her, clad in French pink and French lace, Mattie is somewhere—God only knows *where—in rags!*

'Why, what's the matter?' cries Cinthy, as she looks into her sister's startled face.

'Nothing, darling; only it frightens me to hear you talk so. It is a fearful risk to marry without love, Cinthy! I would rather be dead myself, a thousand times over.'

'Oh, you take it too seriously, my dear. Real life isn't like a play, you know. Besides, did I say I didn't love him? It was going too far, if I did. He's a prosy, good young man, you know; not the sort of person for whom one could conceive *une grande passion;* but one doesn't "go in" for

that sort of thing after one's salad days—eh, Betha?'

'And when did your "salad days" end?' asks Betha, smiling.

'Oh, you must know what I mean, child. Your own experience will give you the explanation. I suppose every girl is *in love*, or fancies herself so, two or three times before she settles. I have had several very warm flirtations myself, but of course the men were ineligibles—they always are—and so my final fate has turned out to be Lord Desborough. He isn't a bad sort. I dare say you'll like him very well; but I'm not in love with him, and I never pretended to be.'

'Well, I shall never marry unless I am in love,' says Betha. 'I have seen the misery of it on more than one occasion.'

'And you are not engaged then, *ma belle*. All the better! You have come to the land of money and fools, and will have leisure to make a sensible choice.'

'My darling little sister, I wish you wouldn't speak like that! It makes me unhappy—for I think you must be so.'

'I am not, indeed, Betha. I am very well contented with my lot, and I think I shall make a most charming viscountess. But do tell me the truth now. Have you never been in love? I should have thought you would have had heaps of admirers, and not known which to choose.'

'Admirers are not lovers,' says Betha, in a low voice.

'Lovers, then! How you do quibble at words! Confess, now! Are you not in love with some nice fellow or other?'

'No, Cinthy,' says Betha, sadly, 'not now! I don't mind telling you that I *was* in love once—very much in love—with a person with whom I was thrown in contact; but I found out that he was not worthy of my affection, and so I fought against, and conquered it.'

'Poor dear Betha! And did it make you unhappy?'

'For a time, darling; but that is all past now—and you must not tell my secret to anybody. Perhaps, after all, it is as well not to be *too much* in love, Cinthy! One expects so much in return, and is so apt to be disappointed.'

'Oh! you're always sure to be disappointed in men,' replies cynical Miss Cinthia. 'You should hear mamma enlarge on that subject. She's safe to give you a dose of it before you've been in the house three times. How she thought papa was an angel, etc., etc., and how he's turned out to be just the other thing.'

'Do you mean to say that they are not happy together?' demands Betha, with open eyes.

'That depends upon what you call "happy," my dear. Betha! you remember our own mother, don't you?'

'Oh, Hyacinth! how can you ask me such a question? *Remember her!* I should think I do—every word and look, dear darling mother! You forget that I am six years older than yourself.'

'No! I don't, my dear; and perhaps you will be all the more surprised to hear that I have not forgotten her either. But what I remember best are the rows we used to have in the house. And they're just as bad now.'

'I *am* sorry,' says Betha, with genuine concern.

'It's all papa, you see, Betha. He has the most aggravating temper, and exercises it on the whole household. I expect our poor weak mother had a nice time of it. But mamma is quite equal to the occasion. She gives it him, right and left, I can tell you; and I have often heard her say that his late wife was a great deal too good for him, and that it was his unkindness that hurried her into her grave.'

Betha has sunk into a chair, and is crying quietly.

'Oh! Cinthy dear, if I am to go back with you to Primrose Hill, please don't tell me of these things. They bring back our dear mother's memory too powerfully to my mind.'

'Well, Betha, I must just make one remark, and then I have done. Both papa's marriages have been love-matches—don't forget that! He has won two wives *pour l'amour de ses beaux yeux*, and a nice husband he has made to both of them. Because, you know, mamma isn't half a bad woman to live with. In fact, if papa was out of the way, we should get on remarkably well together. Only let me give you one caution respecting her. If you've got a nice young man that you want to keep to yourself, don't put him in her way, or he'll be gone before you can say Jack Robinson. She's an awful flirt, and would accept admiration

from her footman if she couldn't get it from anybody else! She tried all she could to entice Lord Desborough away from me, at first, and has never quite forgiven me for her own failure. And now I think you know the worst of her.'

'Suppose we talk of our own mother,' says Betha in a gentle voice. 'Do you know how fond she was of you, dear Cinthy? Her last words were a prayer that God might bless you; her last command to me, an injunction to be your friend and your protector, and to take care of you. And so I would have done, darling, if they had let me. So will I do now, if you will permit me yourself. Don't make a stranger of me, Cinthy. I am nearer to you than Mrs. Durant, remember; nearer, I think, than papa—because you have such a strong claim upon me, not only as my sister, but my mother's favourite child. Tell me everything, dearest. Let me advise and counsel you, as far as lies in my power,

and depend upon it that whilst I live you shall never want a true and faithful friend.'

She is holding her sister's hand in hers, and Cinthy, beneath the searching look of Betha's eyes, turns somewhat pale, and trembles and looks down.

'I think you are very like our mother, as I can remember her, Betha,' she says.

'Oh! continue to think so, darling. Let me stand in the place of our mother to you, my poor motherless Cinthy! Depend on it that no one has ever loved you better than she and I did.'

The younger girl's heart is touched. She turns and hides her face in her sister's bosom.

'I am sure of it, Betha! Her words and looks seem to come back to me again, as I watch your face and hear you speak. Oh! how I wish I could tell you everything—I *must* tell you everything—but not now!—not now! Look! it is nearly half-past one;

and our luncheon is at two; and you have still to dress. Had you not better go to your bedroom?'

'And will you come with me?' says Betha, as she dries her eyes and tries to smile.

'No! You won't be long, I dare say, and I would rather remain here and examine these photograph-albums. What a quantity you have! How jolly it must be to be taken in so many different attitudes. But isn't it a bore to have to sit so often?'

'Rather! But whilst I am absent, Cinthy, I want you to look at these bracelets, and choose the one you like best.'

'For myself, Betha? Oh! how good you are! I shall never be able to make a choice; they are all so beautiful!'

'Please yourself, and you will please me,' says Betha, with a farewell smile as she disappears to her bedroom. But as she enters it, she lays her head down on the dressing-

table and has a little cry, before Bentham is able to plait up her luxuriant hair.

'You are disappointed in the bairn, Miss Betha; I can see that.'

'Oh no! Benty; not disappointed—at least, I ought not to be—for she is very pretty, isn't she? and everything that is pleasant and sweet—only—I have been foolishly fancying that I could be her mother and her friend, and she is older than I am, nursie, by a good many years of experience in the folly of the world.'

'Didn't I tell you so, my dear? Why Miss Cinthy was always like that from her cradle, and ordered about your mamma and you as if you were two slaves. We always called her "the little missus" in the nursery. And do you suppose she'd alter as she grew up? Not a bit of it, Miss Betha. She's a bonnie bairn—bless her heart! but the bonniest part of her is on the outside.'

'Oh, nursie! don't say that!'

'Miss Betha, don't you think anything else, or you'll be grievously disappointed. Miss Cinthy would have been masterful enough under your mamma's government, and what do you suppose she will be under Mrs. Durant's? Why, just her own mistress and everybody else's.'

'She has promised to make me her friend and confidante,' says Betha, sadly.

'Well, that's a good thing, my dear, for if anyone could teach her right from wrong it's yourself. So let us hope for the best, Miss Betha, for if I've any foresight, my bonnie bairn will live to bless the day when she met again her sister the actress.'

CHAPTER VI.

'SHE CANNOT QUITE FORGET.'

Betha's first audience with her father after seven years of separation, is conducted with so much grandeur and pomposity, as would appear quite a comical proceeding in the eyes of anyone who was not acquainted with the reason of their estrangement. Mrs. Durant had been wise enough to order herself to be denied to all visitors, so that the meeting may be strictly a private one; and as Betha and Hyacinth enter the doors of the house on Primrose Hill, they are informed that the major awaits their presence in the library.

'Better come and get your tooth out at once,'

says Hyacinth, irreverently, as she pulls her sister towards the library-door. 'He ought to be horribly ashamed of himself, and if he isn't, I hope you'll make him feel so.'

But Betha refuses to be pushed headlong into the arms of Major Durant. She has received Mrs. Durant courteously, and her sister affectionately; but she cannot quite forget that her father is at the bottom of all the misery and humiliation and loneliness she has been made to suffer for so many years past; and if she has now worked her way up to a position of envy, it is from no assistance that he has given her. The last time they saw each other, he cursed her for her likeness to her dead mother, and thrust her—his own flesh and blood—from his doors, when she was ready and willing to re-enter them and do her duty. Betha has no false sentiment about her nature. The idea of reconciliation with her family is sweet to her, for Hyacinth's sake, but it cannot blind her to

the fact that her father is a selfish, narrow-minded, and cowardly man, who does not disdain to wage war with women and children, even when he has vowed to love and cherish them.

A more emotional girl might rush into his arms, in the joy and excitement of reunion, and sob out what is not true—that the fault of the estrangement lies at her door. Betha cannot tell a falsehood even in her softest moments. The same pride that nerved the young girl of sixteen to go forth into the world and earn her own livelihood, makes the successful and triumphant woman feel that it is not *her* part to sue for a reconciliation which she has never forfeited.

Whilst she halts upon the threshold of the library, her father stands within, in a curious state of nervous trepidation.

He told his wife yesterday that he believed he should be more alarmed at meeting his daughter, than she would be at meeting

him—and he was right. Now that the moment has arrived, he would like to run away, if that were possible, sooner than encounter her. The last interview they held together is as present to his mental vision as to hers. He knows what a craven, unmanly part he took on that occasion, and he dreads what he shall read in Elizabeth's clear grey eyes when they meet again.

But neither father nor daughter have much time for deliberation, before Hyacinth has pushed open the library-door with the exclamation :

'Here is Betha, papa!' and they advance towards each other and meet in the centre of the room.

Betha makes no sign nor gesture of greeting. She waits to let Major Durant take the initiative in welcoming her back to, as he did in turning her out of, her natural home. Her inaction renders him still more nervous.

'Well, Elizabeth,' he commences with a

jerky laugh, as he takes her passive hand and kisses (or rather pecks) her on the forehead, 'I am glad to see you again, and I trust our reunion may be productive of mutual pleasure and benefit.'

'I trust it may, papa.'

'We have been separated for many years, and perhaps absence has made both of us see a little clearer than we did. It is foolish for the members of one family to quarrel, Elizabeth, very foolish; they are like the bundle of sticks, you know, strong when united and weak when apart. So that I hope we have seen the last of dissension in ours.'

'I hope so too, papa.'

The major grows still more uncomfortable. He does not like the task of sustaining all the conversation.

'I think you are grown, Elizabeth—considerably grown—and very much improved; but you are not like Hyacinth. You are the genius of the family, I suppose, and Hyacinth

is the beauty; so your merits are equally divided.'

'What rubbish you are talking, papa!' cries Miss Hyacinth, pertly. 'Betha's face and mine are in such different styles that no one but you would think of comparing them. She is just like poor dear mamma, and I am the image of you; and most people would consider her much the handsomer of the two.'

'I am not envious of that distinction, Cinthy,' says Betha, smiling; 'I am quite ready to yield the palm of beauty to yourself. If I only resemble my dearest mother in her character as well as her face, we will give papa all the credit of your pretty features.'

For the life of her, she cannot help letting him understand from the beginning, that no amount of reconciliation can ever make her unfaithful to the memory of her mother.

'You are neither of you daughters to be ashamed of—as far as your looks go,' replies

Major Durant. He guesses the reason why Betha has mentioned his dead wife's name, and will have his little slap at her profession in return.

'Well, I should think not!' exclaims Hyacinth. 'What more do you want? You have two of the best-looking and cleverest daughters in London, and you'd better mind your P's and Q's with us, papa, into the bargain; for I'm going to be a viscountess, and Betha is engaged to be married to a duke, and we'll never ask you to a single dinner-party unless you behave yourself.'

'Cinthy! how can you talk such nonsense!' says Betha. 'You know I am not engaged at all.'

'Well, you might be to-morrow, if you chose, so it comes to the same thing, and for my own part, I have not yet made up my mind whether, when I am Lady Desborough, I shall own papa and mamma at all. It will sound awfully bad, won't

it? for her ladyship's father to be nothing but an old major on the retired list, with a bald place as big as a cheese-plate on the top of his head, and trousers that "bag" at the knees! Your trousers do "bag" at the knees, papa! I've told you of it several times, and Desborough asked me the other day if you dealt at Kino's. That was a nice question, wasn't it? for the future viscountess to be called upon to answer!'

Major Durant laughs heartily — rather more heartily than easily—at these pleasantries on the part of his younger daughter, and Betha feels thankful for them—pert and silly though they be—as a prevention to more earnest conversation.

'I have not yet seen Mrs. Durant!' she remarks presently.

'She's in the drawing-room, and the luncheon is probably half spoilt,' says Hyacinth; 'so come along, Betha, and let us find her.'

'Permit me!' interposes the major, offering his arm to his elder daughter, and so he conducts her in state to the presence of her step-mother.

Mrs. Durant receives her with effusive affection: the stiffness of the previous day has vanished, and to see the greeting she bestows on Betha, one would think they had lived all their lives together. It is infinitely amusing also, during the meal that follows, to hear her speak of the young actress's genius and success, and claim a share in both as the natural due of the family that has had a hand in producing them.

What people say and think and do, regarding the celebrated Miss Selwyn, flows as naturally from her lips as though they had been in the habit of lunching with each other every day, and she rather flaunts than otherwise the fact of the girl's profession and the triumphs it has brought her, as though she were calling on the very do-

mestics to fall down and worship this golden calf, who has once more returned to the bosom of her family.

Major Durant, on the other hand, preserves a decided stiffness on the subject of the stage, and makes answers in monosyllables when called on to join in his wife's psalms of praise. The very name of it recalls his ill-treatment of the girl before him, and he resents the idea, not for what she is, but for what he falsely prophesied she would be. He cannot help being glad that Betha should become a source of pride instead of a disgrace to him: but yet he cannot forgive her for putting him in the wrong. He has the false petty shame of a mean nature that cannot bring him to acknowledge he was mistaken, even though that mistake has turned out for his own good.

So that, notwithstanding Mrs. Durant's flattering compliments and out-spoken praise,

the luncheon is not a happy meal to Betha, and it is made less so by hearing the way in which Hyacinth addresses both her parents, and which, from their complete indifference, is evidently her usual manner.

Betha has met with several discourteous and unrefined companions on the stage, but they have been girls raised from a lower rank of life—not young ladies reared in the atmosphere of a private house. She has yet to make acquaintance with the fast girl of the period, who has no respect for age, nor religion, nor public opinion, nor even for herself.

Bentham has truly said that Betha is the greater child of the two. Beside this off-hand out-spoken younger sister, she feels as if she were a babe in arms.

The meal is over at last, and everyone is thankful when they rise from table.

'You will spend the afternoon with us, my dear,' says Mrs. Durant; 'I am longing to

have a good talk with you in the drawing-room.'

'Oh, then, mamma! you won't have any such thing,' interposes Hyacinth; 'because Betha is coming up to my bedroom with me to look over my things.'

'But, Cinthy! I had better go with Mrs. Durant first,' says Betha, mindful of what is due from a visitor to her hostess.

'Rubbish!' exclaims the younger girl, petulantly; 'she only wants to hear about the prince and princess over again! I'm sure she's talked enough at luncheon to last her a lifetime. It's not fair to try and take Betha away from me, mamma, on the very first day she comes home, too! She's not *your* daughter, remember, and she *is* my sister.'

'Oh! very well,' says Mrs. Durant, resignedly; 'of course you will have your own way, Hyacinth. I am nothing in this house compared to you! However, if your papa

permits you to behave in that fashion, no one else has a right to interfere.'

'Hyacinth! I shall go into the drawing-room for half an hour, first,' says Betha, decidedly.

'Oh, don't,' coaxes Cinthy, with her arm round her waist. 'Come with me!'

'It is very hard to resist you, darling, but I must do what is right! The carriage will not call for me till five, so we shall have plenty of time for a talk in your bedroom afterwards.'

Cinthy pouts and pleads and tries to shake her sister's determination in vain. For once she finds her own will opposed with gentle firmness; and under the new phase of discipline, follows Betha into the drawing-room, and tries what she can do to render Mrs. Durant's interview with her as unsatisfactory as possible.

'Here's my prig Desborough!' she exclaims, in the midst of an earnest inquiry

from her step-mother as to where Betha procured those lovely dresses she saw her wear as Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice;' and jumping up, she places a photograph in her sister's hand.

It represents a young man of whom nothing worse, nor better, can be said than that he is not ungentlemanly, nor stupid, nor ugly; indeed the whole of Lord Desborough's life, like his appearance, deals in negatives, and perhaps the most positive thing about him is the rashness with which he has entered into an engagement to marry Hyacinth Durant.

'Doesn't he look a noodle?' continues Cinthy; 'I told him so when he gave it to me, so starched and prim. I hate a prim man. I know he'll turn out a bully like papa. They always do!'

'I wish you would not mention your papa in that disrespectful way before me, Hyacinth,' remarks Mrs. Durant, grandly.

'Oh, now, mamma! it's no good putting on any airs before Betha, because I've told her all about the rows you have with papa. But if Desborough tries on any of those games with me, he'll find he has come to the wrong box. I shall have the benefit of my home experience, and know how to "squash" him in the bud.'

'Oh dear—oh dear! it is terrible to hear you talk of such an estimable young man in that careless manner. But I trust you will not take all this giddy girl says for gospel, my dear Elizabeth. She has been most fortunate in securing the affections of such a person as Lord Desborough, who——'

'I know I have,' interrupts Hyacinth, without ceremony. 'He was considered the best *parti* of last season. Twelve thousand a year, Betha, a house in Portland Place, and a very nice box in the country. But I know somebody whom I would rather marry, ten times over.'

'You shouldn't think of such things: it is very wrong,' remarks Mrs. Durant, sententiously.

'All the nice things *are* wrong,' laughs Hyacinth; 'nevertheless, it is true, and you know it, mamma.'

'I have heard some such nonsense from your lips, Hyacinth, but I trusted you had forgotten all about it long ago,' replies her step-mother.

'I think Lord Desborough is very distinguished in appearance,' says Betha, with a desire to turn the conversation; 'and after all, that is the main thing. Beauty in a man is quite a secondary consideration.'

'Of course it is!' acquiesces Mrs. Durant.

'Well! I don't think so!' says Hyacinth; and here the subject drops.

But as soon as they find themselves in the bedroom together, Betha turns to her sister with a face full of anxiety.

CHAPTER VII.

'BE TRUE TO YOURSELF.'

It is a pretty, fresh-looking bedroom, daintily furnished in blue and white, and ornamented with photographs and bits of china; a fit nest, apparently, for innocent and ingenuous maidenhood; and Betha is half ashamed to feel suspicious in such an atmosphere of milk and roses. Yet her anxiety for her sister weighs down all other considerations, and the voice in which she puts her first question decidedly trembles.

'Cinthy, darling! you did not mean what you said just now, downstairs?'

'What did I say downstairs?' says that young lady, flippantly.

She has seated herself beside her sister, in front of an open window that overlooks the Park. Before them is spread the grass of Primrose Hill; beyond, the trees are waving, the birds are singing, and little children are toddling to and fro, filling the summer air with their baby laughter. How is it possible to have a thought of evil amidst so many sweet sounds and sights of innocence?

'What are you alluding to, Betha?' demands Hyacinth, as she squeezes her sister's arm affectionately, and looks up into her face; 'I said so many different things downstairs.'

'I am wronging you, perhaps, even to mention it, dear Cinthy; and I am sure you cannot have considered the interpretation some people might put upon your words. But just now, when you were speaking of Lord Desborough, you said there was some

one else whom you would rather marry ten times over. Surely—surely, my darling sister! that cannot be true?'

Hyacinth opens her big dark eyes to their fullest extent.

'Surely—*surely* it is, Betha,' she repeats. 'And why should you be so surprised at it? There are a dozen fellows of my acquaintance whom I would rather marry than Desborough—except for the title, you know! Didn't I tell you I am not in love with him, and never shall be! We don't pull together at all. He is shocked at everything I do, and I am disgusted at everything he says; so how is it possible we should agree?'

'But, my dearest child, you will never marry him on such terms! Why, you will be miserable together. Marriage ought to be such a very close tie; so tender a friendship! Such a complete mingling of ideas and interests and affections.'

'Betha! no one marries with such notions

nowadays,' says the younger girl, with an air of ineffable wisdom. 'A woman would be laughed at for expecting it.'

'But to pass your life without love or sympathy, Cinthy! Have you thought what a terrible privation that will be to you?'

'I don't see why I should pass my life without it. I can have friends, I suppose? I have several now! You don't suppose, Betha, do you, that I have given up all my lovers, because I am going to marry Lord Desborough?'

'But you should have done so, Cinthy! It is very wrong not to do so! You are breaking faith with Lord Desborough every time you allow another man to look at you with eyes of admiration!'

Hyacinth bursts into a peal of laughter.

'Oh, Betha! how comical you are! What old-fashioned notions you have preserved! I think they must be some remnants of Miss Denny's "elegance," from the Princess

College. Fancy, not allowing another man to look at me! Why, I get flowers, and notes, and music, and all that sort of rubbish from different people every day. I know half-a-dozen fellows who are ready to die for me. But I don't care for them, you know, Betha! There is only one man'—with a deep sigh—'that I *really* care for in the wide world, and he is the best, and the cleverest, and the handsomest darling that was ever seen. But it's of no use ever thinking about him!'

'Why not, Cinthy? Does he not care for you?'

'Oh, he loves me to distraction, my dear, but *he's got no money*—at least none to speak of. I have been carrying on with him for the last twelvemonth, and I dare not tell him I am engaged to Desborough, for I believe he'd murder him or me, or all three of us!'

'And what is this gentleman's name, Cinthy?'

Hyacinth looks up suspiciously. 'You won't tell mamma or papa—will you!'

'Darling! how can you ask me? Have I not promised to be your friend? Indeed, Cinthy, I will mention the name before no one except yourself.'

'I believe you, Betha! Somehow I have more trust in you than in anybody I have ever known, although we have been separated so many years. Well, then, his name is Gervase Claverton—the Honourable Gervase Claverton: he is one of Lord Litchfield's sons: and we met him in Paris the year before last. Isn't "Gervase" a sweet name, Betha! Sometimes I go to sleep saying it to myself; and if you saw him, you would say he is as sweet as his name!'

'But you do not meet this gentleman except in society, surely, Cinthy?' or when you are with papa and Mrs. Durant?'

'Oh, don't I! That's all you know about it, Betha. Why, we're *always* meeting

in the Park, or on Hampstead Heath, or in Kensington Gardens. And he writes me such dear letters, too—to the Vigo Street Post-office. Sometimes I can't get out to fetch them, but we have an awfully good little maid here—the under-housemaid—and she is in my confidence, so they don't stay there long.'

During this recital, Betha's face has grown pale with dismay.

'Oh, Cinthy, Cinthy!' she cries, 'you *must* give up this acquaintance!'

The younger girl regards her with unmitigated astonishment.

'Why! what harm is there in a little flirtation? Every girl does the same.'

'But not every girl that is engaged to be married to another man, Cinthy.'

'Indeed they do, and after they're married as well as before,' pouts Hyacinth. 'You talk as if it were a crime, Betha. I'm not particularly good at my Bible, but I

know there's nothing in the commandments about not flirting, because I hear them every Sunday.'

'It's not the actual flirtation,' sighs Betha, 'but what it may lead to, darling.'

'Oh, bother what it may lead to!' cries the younger girl. 'Let the future take care of itself. All I think of is the present, and I am quite determined not to give up seeing Gervase Claverton until I am obliged.'

There is silence between them for a few moments after this, whilst the trees wave on, and the sparrows twitter, and the fun of the toddling children become indistinct to Betha, for the tears through which she views them.

'Look here, Betha dear!' resumes Hyacinth in a coaxing voice. 'What makes you such an old prude? I declare you're as bad as Desborough! I thought you all flirted and made love together on the stage, and would think nothing of a girl having more than one string to her bow.'

'That is not my experience, Cinthia,' replies Betha, sadly, 'though I dare say it is the general opinion. The life of an actor is full of hard work. He has very little time to think of anything but his business; and since the men and women employed at a theatre only meet there for rehearsals or performances, there is not much opportunity for carrying on flirtations behind the scenes. Of course, some are careless and frivolous and dishonourable. There are persons of that class in every place of life; but I have found them to be the exception on the stage, and not the rule.'

'Do you think me dishonourable, Betha?' asks Cinthia, in a low voice.

'Heaven forbid, my dearest sister, that I should apply such a term to you, or believe that you would knowingly commit a dishonourable action; but I am horrified to think you should have been brought up with such loose ideas respecting right and wrong.

What can papa have been about—or Mrs. Durant? Oh, Cinthy! if our own dear mother had lived, you would never have spoken to me as you have to-day.'

Hyacinth twists up her mouth, and looks down, and plaits the trimming of her dress, and makes no answer.

'To have engaged yourself to marry Lord Desborough, Cinthy, is to have engaged yourself to be the guardian of his honour and good name. How are you doing that by keeping up a secret correspondence, and holding assignations with another man! It is worse than foolish—it is wicked—though I acquit you of believing it to be so.'

'Everybody does the same!' reiterates Cinthy.

'Then everybody is wrong, darling! That is no excuse that you should be so too!'

'But come now, Betha, do you mean to

tell me you have never carried on a double game yourself ?'

'*Never*, Cinthy ! I have many faults, but I could not live a life of duplicity. Will you bear with me whilst I tell you a little story, dearest.'

'Go on,' says Hyacinth, curtly.

'*I* was once engaged to be married, Cinthy, to a very good young fellow, and who, I believe, loved me very dearly. But I did not understand my own feelings. I accepted him because he had done me a great service, and I knew how kind and true he was. But another man came between us, a handsome, brilliant, unprincipled fellow, who took my heart completely by storm, and made me miserable. I worshipped that man, Cinthy ! I thought him the noblest and most talented creature God had ever made, and I grew so discontented and melancholy that my *fiancé* saw that our engagement had become a burden to me. So he released me of

his own accord, and just as I believed I was about to be made happy with the love of this other man, I found that he had deceived me. He ran away with one of my friends—with a foolish, flirting, married woman, and dragged her down with him to misery and disgrace.'

'But what has become of the one you were engaged to, Betha?' asks Hyacinth, in a tone of interest. 'Haven't you seen him since?'

'Never, dear! but I know that all must be well with him, for he went back to live with his father and grandmother, to whom he was all the world. He has money, and a beautiful home and everything his heart can desire, and I have no regrets on his account. But I often think, Cinthy, that if that other man had not come between us, I should have grown to feel a true friendship and esteem for my *fiancé*, and our engagement might have resulted in a *real* union; a marriage of

hearts and minds, as well as of worldly interests.'

'I hope he was handsome,' says Cinthia.

'Why?'

'Because you'll come together again some day, perhaps, and I hate ugly men!'

'You incorrigible girl!' laughs her sister. 'No, Cinthy, there is not the slightest chance that we shall ever come together, or even meet again. And perhaps you will be glad to hear it, for he is not handsome. He is tall and lanky, and short-sighted, and when I first saw him I though him remarkably plain!

'How could you ever have accepted him? exclaims Miss Hyacinth, with an expressive *moue.*

'Never mind that now! I only tell you the story to put you on your guard. Lord Desborough may be as worthy of your love as I firmly believe that young man was of mine, and Mr. Claverton may prove as

false to you as the other did to me. Oh! Hyacinth, be true to yourself and the engagement you have entered into, and keep to either one man or the other.'

'Betha! are you ever unhappy?' asked Hyacinth, as she kisses the tears from her sister's cheek.

'A little—dear! Sometimes,' is the whispered reply.

'What! when you are run after, and talked of by all London. If I were you, I should not have a wish ungratified!'

'Ah, Cinthy! public praise has no power to fill up a woman's heart. She wants home-love and duties, and sympathy, and all the rest is worth nothing without them!'

'And you think they would be enough for your happiness.'

'I am sure they would, for yours and for mine! if—you could only see it.'

'But I couldn't live without money, Betha.

I should hate poverty, and having to scrape and save.'

'Then marry Lord Desborough, my child, and be faithful to him. He has a good true face, to my mind, and you will be all the better for a husband who will restrain your giddiness!'

'But what will Gervase say if I tell him?' says Cinthy with a downcast head.

'Never mind what he says; do what is right, without fear of the consequences, and you will be the happier for it, darling! Take my word that you will.'

'Fancy you lecturing me in this fashion!' pouts Cinthy. 'I never thought you would preach goody-goody to me the very first time you entered the house.'

'You were prepared to find me twice as careless as yourself, dear, I suppose—thanks to those who imbued you with the idea that an actress must necessarily lose all sense of principle. But I have not quite forgotten

our mother's teaching, Hyacinth—nor that her dear spirit may be cognisant of what we are saying and doing at this very moment. You will not grieve her, dearest sister. You will not run the risk even of letting her see one action that would make her blush for her 'little Cinthy.'

The voice—the gaze—the earnest words, are all so much like those of her dead mother, that when Betha concludes her appeal by opening her arms, Hyacinth falls into them, and cries bitterly.

CHAPTER VIII.

'HE KNOWS YOUR ADDRESS.'

This burst of confidence on the part of Hyacinth leaves Betha very anxious, but it also leaves her very happy. The careless and unprincipled way in which her sister regards the most serious events of life is a revelation to her who has not hitherto enjoyed an opportunity of being instructed in the doctrines of fashionable morality. But the trust Cinthia has reposed in her, and the tears she has shed, give Betha a hope that she may be able, in the future, to watch over and influence her for good. She returns to her hotel, full of her sister's prospects and intentions, and

delights old Bentham with accounts of their 'bonnie bairn's' goodness of heart and frankness of disposition; and in the joy of their reunion, Betha goes to bed that night happier than she has been for years. She knows now what she has pined and longed for—what the one bitter drop in her cup of success has been—and feels that she would not give up seeing her sister again for all the honours and benefits her profession can heap upon her.

'Mother's child!' her fond lips keep on repeating as she sinks to sleep. 'Mother's favourite child! I would lay down my life to preserve you from evil—for her dear sake.'

And if the spirit of the departed were hovering over her at that moment, she must have acknowledged that whatever her earthly judgment may have been—*this* was the daughter who should have been cherished and beloved the best of all! After the awkwardness of the first visit has passed, Betha

goes to Primrose Hill as often as she can, and Mrs. Durant's afternoon receptions become crowded by the dear friends who did not consider it worth their while to visit her for her own sake, but who flock to her house from sheer curiosity to see and speak with the actress on the subject of whose genius all London wags its mighty tongue. On these occasions Mrs. Durant and Hyacinth are all flutter and new ribbons, and 'my daughter the actress' and 'my sister the actress' is the great point and centre of attraction. Betha goes there, naturally, for the sake of Hyacinth. Her father she seldom sees—the antipathy on the one side, and the shame on the other, will never die out between these two—and with Mrs. Durant she has as little communication as possible; but she seats herself close to her sister directly she enters the room, and talks to no one who does not talk to them both. The cards of invitation which arrive daily at her hotel are neglected for the same cause;

and the duchesses and countesses, who are but too often obliged nowadays to depend on professional talent as an attraction to their suppers and soirées, despair of ever securing the attendance of Miss Selwyn. She favours them sometimes, but only when there is no chance of seeing Hyacinth: and in a few weeks the two girls have become as fast friends as if they had never been separated from the cradle.

It is not long before Betha is introduced to her sister's *fiancé*, and she takes a liking to him from the first.

Lord Desborough is not handsome, strictly speaking, but he has a good kind face, and what is better, he has a good heart. He is rather too fond of bringing forward his opinions in society and of laying down the law; and he has a prosy and somewhat slow mode of deliverance, which Betha can well imagine —with a deep sigh—is unattractive to the woman who does not love him. Still, he is

honourable and right-principled—which is a great thing to be in the nineteenth century—and he is really attached to Hyacinth, though he bores her to death with animadversions on her tastes and pursuits and mode of dress. He treats her as, and evidently considers her to be, a trifling thoughtless child whom he is about to rescue from a very godless house, and train to be everything that his own heart can desire. And Miss Hyacinth Durant is, on the contrary, a woman ready made: with deep-rooted ideas on her own course of life, and a fixed determination to abide by them. *Voilà tout!* Betha, analysing the viscount's character by the exposition of his theories, cannot for some time satisfy herself as to the attraction he holds for her. Until, one day, when he turns a very fond though reproachful gaze upon Hyacinth for the utterance of some unusually giddy remark, and it suddenly flashes upon Betha that he has a strong look of Robert

Frere. Yes! there is a decided resemblance, although Lord Desborough is a short man with a spare figure, and rejoices in sandy hair and a freckled complexion. Yet what avails the best or the worst of looks—I speak from the feminine point of view—when a man's heart is in the right place, and he has the disposition to deal patiently and tenderly with weakness and folly?

Patience and tenderness are the two great qualities which a woman's heart and life require. If they could exist without love (which is impossible), she could exist without it also. Lord Desborough has the same tender look in his eyes, the same patient expression about his mouth, which moved Betha most to appreciate the affection offered to her by Bobby Frere. Poor Bobby Frere! As the old familiar name returns to her mind, something like tears rise to Betha's eyes.

She wonders what he is doing now, dear, patient, tender Rob! whether he has quite

got over his disappointment! and if those soft brown eyes look as fondly at some one else as they used to do at her! She pictures him at Baron's Court, the pride and delight of Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere; the pride and delight, perhaps, of his wife and children! She must not forget that it is six years since she heard any tidings of him. There is no saying what may not have happened in all that length of time!

'What are you looking so glum for, Betha?' exclaims Hyacinth, as the reflection of that thought passes over her candid features; 'has Desborough been boring you with one of his sermons? Really, my lord, it is too bad that my friends should have to stand the infliction of your lectures as well as myself! One victim in a family is surely enough!'

'Have I fatigued you with my conversation, Miss Selwyn? Am I inconsiderate?' demands his lordship, anxiously.

'Not in the least, Lord Desborough,' re-

plies Betha. 'I have been very much interested in the account of your work amongst the seamen; and if I looked grave for a moment it was only because your manner reminded me of a dear friend whom I have lost!'

'Are you becoming sentimental, my dear?' cries Hyacinth with a kiss on her sister's cheek. 'Well, then I will leave you together! It would be a shame to spoil sport!' and with a nod to her *fiancé* she flutters away to another part of the room.

'Dear thoughtless child!' says Lord Desborough, as his eye follows her through the crowd.

'Yes, very dear and very thoughtless!' replies Betha, 'but *not* a child, my lord. Don't fall into that error! I believe that by kindness and *patience* you may make my sister anything you choose, but you cannot close your eyes to the fact that she has received a very careless training hitherto.'

'She has been grossly neglected,' says Lord

Desborough, emphatically. 'Forgive my saying so, Miss Selwyn, in your presence; but you know it to be the truth, and were Hyacinth not so open and child-like in her disposition, I should be afraid to marry a pupil of Mrs. Durant.'

Betha remembers Mr. Gervase Claverton, and sighs.

'I could forgive anything in a woman,' goes on Lord Desborough, 'except deceit. No amount of thoughtlessness or levity or even open rebellion could destroy my love, because I should always trust to its influence to bring my wife round, eventually, to my way of thinking; but if I once found her out to have been guilty of deliberate deceit, all would be over between us. I should have no faith in her from that moment, and without faith, I could give her neither love nor respect. You remind me, Miss Selwyn, that your sister is not a child. In years I agree with you that she is not; but a woman's life is her love.

She does not begin to live until she begins to love, and Hyacinth is quite innocent in that respect. No! don't open your eyes at me, Miss Selwyn—I know what you are thinking of; but I don't mind telling *you* that I am perfectly aware that she does not love me—not yet—or at least not in that way! She is a careless giddy child, and little thinks of the pain she is inflicting; but I will *make* her love me, if I devote my whole life to the purpose.'

'And she *will* love you—she *shall* love you,' replies Betha, as she looks with admiration into the little viscount's kindling face. 'She is not worthy of so much devotion—no woman is—but she must learn to value and appreciate it.'

And she resolves anew to watch over and guard her sister's heart from the machinations of all those who would come between her and the noble gentleman to whom she has plighted her faith.

At one of these afternoon receptions Betha comes unexpectedly upon her Aunt Janie and Blanche Chapman. These ladies, who have naturally heard the whole account of their relative's return to England and her father's house, think it is time they should come in for a share of the *éclat* which attends the young actress's presence, and have been 'dropping in' at Primrose Hill, a dozen times already, on the chance of finding her there.

And now, as Mrs. Chapman espies her niece seated by Lord Desborough's side, and evidently regarded with the highest estimation by that pink of noblemen, she sidles up to her with half-closed eyes, and a mouth twisted up into an expression of the tenderest reproach.

'Elizabeth! my dearest girl! Is it thus we meet again? Blanche and I have been hoping and expecting to hear from you for the last month. Is it possible that whilst

the memory of your sainted mother lives, you can forget your poor Aunt Janie ?'

Betha rises at her aunt's approach, and takes her proffered hand.

'No, Aunt Janie,' she answers in a quiet voice, 'I have not forgotten you.'

The same pride which forbade her to meet the advances of Major Durant more than halfway, forbids her to fall into the arms of Mrs. Chapman now. Her father and her step-mother may have been guilty of injustice towards her; but this woman with the pretty, faded, soft-looking face and the half-closed eyes, treated her with the most refined cruelty.

She persuaded her *not* to return to her father's protection, nor seek a reconciliation with him, when she might have done so, and then when she was tired of the *rôle* of second mother, which she had gratuitously assumed, she (metaphorically) turned the girl out of doors and refused to speak to her

when she had chosen the means by which to earn her livelihood.

'How would it have been between Aunt Janie and herself,' thinks Betha, with a sudden rush of contempt, 'if instead of having gained the top of the tree, she were still in want of her daily bread?'

And the thought is in her mind as she makes that quiet answer to Mrs. Chapman's speech.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' wails Aunt Janie; 'surely you are going to kiss me, Betha!—my dear Mary's eldest daughter, and to whom I have always felt as a second mother! Hyacinth has never been anything to me compared to you. I love her, of course, but she is her father's child—not mine. But see what a few years of separation can effect! Here have I been panting to meet you again, and you hardly seem glad to see me.'

'Indeed, Aunt Janie, I *am* glad! and had

you called on me in Piccadilly, you may be sure I should not have denied myself to you.'

'Oh, my dear! called on you in Piccadilly; but you are such a grand person now, I understand, and on visiting terms with half the aristocracy, that I am afraid poor Blanche and I would feel sadly out of place there. We are living quite in a small way now, you know, out at Shepherd's Bush, and do not expect to receive the attention that we did during your poor uncle's lifetime. There *was* a time, as you may remember, Elizabeth, when I was able to offer the best of all I possessed to those who had a claim upon me; but that time is past. What with the depression in the money market, and the failure of several companies in which your good uncle left shares, life is not what it was with us. But what are we, that we should presume to find fault with the decrees of Providence! Still, such as our surround-

ings are, you will come and see us, I hope, Elizabeth.'

But Elizabeth has no such intention. She does not forget that she left Aunt Janie's last house with an order never to enter it again; and the proud little heart that has battled against so much will not lay itself down to be trampled on a second time.

'My days are very much occupied, Aunt Janie, and I scarcely go out anywhere, except it is to see my sister. So you must excuse me from visiting you at Shepherd's Bush; but I am generally at home in the afternoons, if you like to call upon me.'

'But you have not seen your cousin Blanche yet—dear Blanche, who is dying to meet you!' exclaims Mrs. Chapman as she goes in search of her daughter to cover her confusion.

After a while, Miss Blanche is captured, and presents herself before Betha with a very red, confused face, which contrasts ludi-

crously with her cousin's indifferent demeanour. But when we stand, proudly conscious of the world's good opinion, we can afford to be indifferent to the slights of a bygone day.

'Doesn't it seem wonderful!' exclaims Miss Blanche, in her agitation—'that you should be here, I mean, and all the rest of it. Mamma and I went to the "Pompeian" the first night you appeared, and we thought it lovely — didn't we, mamma? And it seemed so funny, to think it should be *you*, you know.'

'Yes,' chimes in Mrs. Chapman, 'although we had not been inside a theatre for years—not since your poor dear uncle's death, in fact—we were amongst the very first to welcome you back, Elizabeth. A poor tribute, but a sincere one. And before that time, even I had become the possessor of one of your photographs—taken as Juliet, I believe—and turned out that of my own

child, in order that I might put it in a frame. And it stands now on our drawing-room table.'

'And who do you think we met when we were in the shop, choosing it?' interposes Blanche. 'An old friend of yours, Betha, in fact—with a schoolgirl giggle,—'I think I may say, an old admirer; though I suppose you have so many by this time, that you won't think much of him.'

'And who may that have been?' says Betha, smiling.

For the moment she is quite unconscious that Blanche can possibly have met anybody in whom she would feel the slightest interest.

'Why, Mr. Frere! Bobby Frere, as we used to call him.'

'*Who?*' cries Betha, with a face of crimson.

'Bobby Frere! Don't you remember him? A tall lanky fellow, who used to stoop dreadfully. We were awfully wicked in those days, Betha, and surnamed him "the tottering

Maypole," until mamma reproved our levity, and told us he was not a young man to be "sneezed at." He will be very rich some day, I believe. He is the son of Sir Willoughby Frere of Baron's Court. Don't you remember his telling us that——'

'Yes—yes! I remember everything,' interrupts Betha, with breathless haste. 'But do tell me where he is, my dear old friend Rob? Oh, he was so kind to me at a time when I needed kindness! I would give anything to meet him again.'

'Bless my soul!' cries Blanche; 'I had no idea you were so intimate! But now I remember, he did say he had seen you a short time before you left England. But if you are such friends, why didn't you write to each other whilst you were away?'

'Oh, we are not quite on "corresponding" terms!' says Betha, with a sudden blush.

Blanche misinterprets that blush. She thinks it means that her cousin is more

anxious to renew her acquaintance with Mr. Frere, than Mr. Frere is to meet her again. And since he has promised to call in Shepherd's Bush, and Sir Willoughby's health is evidently declining, Miss Chapman considers it will be prudent to hold her tongue respecting Bobby's present whereabouts.

'Can't you tell me where he is living?' continues Betha. 'Had he only come up from Baron's Court for a few days; or is he making any stay in London?'

Mrs. Chapman is about to reply when her daughter pinches her arm; and poor Aunt Janie has learned by cruel experience to be very submissive to the warnings conveyed by those fierce and painful pinches.

'Mr. Frere didn't give us any address,' says Blanche. 'He is travelling about, I believe; staying with friends, perhaps. Anyway, he is not settled, and said he had no time to see anyone but ourselves; but then, we have known him from a boy.'

'But when you see him again, Blanche, will you tell him that I am in England, at Davidson's Hotel, in Piccadilly, and I shall be so pleased if he will call on me?'

'Oh, my dear! he knows you are in England, perfectly well, and your address into the bargain; but I believe the poor fellow has some business on hand just now, that leaves him no leisure for afternoon visits. At least, so I gathered when I asked him if he had seen you.'

Betha's lip quivers a little. It is hard to realise that Rob has grown *quite* indifferent to her.

'Do you know if he is married yet?' she inquires next.

'No. But he is very much altered. I think you would scarcely recognise him. He is much broader, and has left off stooping; so that he is quite a giant in appearance. And he wears a large moustache that covers

his mouth, and a short beard. But he is as blind as ever.'

'He said he was with some firm in Leadenhall Street,' remarks Aunt Janie, indiscreetly.

'No such thing, mamma? How silly you are!' exclaims Blanche, in a most unfilial tone of voice. 'He only said he had to visit that firm when I asked him about calling on Elizabeth! You must forgive him if he doesn't put in an appearance, cousin. He was always shy, you know, and I believe he has left town by this time, and gone into Buckinghamshire.'

'It is of no consequence,' replies Betha, quietly. 'If I wish to see him, I have only to write to Baron's Court! A letter is sure to be forwarded to him from there.'

'I *know* he had your address!' cries Blanche, as a parting shot, as she follows her mother from the room.

'I cannot imagine why you should have

objected to my telling your cousin Elizabeth that Mr. Frere is partner at MacKinnon's,' observes Aunt Janie, in an injured tone, as they walk homeward. 'And I really must beg you will leave off that practice of pinching me in company, Blanche. I *cannot,* and I *will* not bear it any longer! My poor arm aches now from the violence with which you treated it.'

'Oh, bother your arm, mamma!' replies her daughter, rudely. 'Why will you make such egregious mistakes, then? I *must* take some means of stopping you. Didn't you see how eager Elizabeth was to get Mr. Frere's address? She always flirted with him in her demure way, from the first hour they met; and she only wants to draw him on and make a fool of him again. It isn't fair! It leaves other girls no chance whatever. And just as he has begun to re-visit us too!'

'But he has never called a second time,

Blanche, though we have invited him again and again.'

'Never mind that! He may call, and if not, what can Elizabeth want with him? She has plenty of admirers, I dare say. Ladies on the stage are not (as a rule) *very* particular as to who makes love to them; and I'd bet anything my prim-looking cousin proves to be no exception. Anyway, *I* shall not help her to get Bobby Frere into her net a second time!'

CHAPTER IX.

'I WILL NEVER CEASE TO BE YOUR FRIEND!'

Miss Chapman's assertion that Robert Frere knows her address, and made trivial excuses for not calling on her, wounds Betha even more than it was intended to do.

Her first thought, on hearing he was in London, was to seek him out, and shake him by the hand, and ask him frankly to assure her that the past had lost all sting for him. But her cousin's account has made her change her mind. There is no need to put such a question.

Rob has evidently got over his disappointment, and perhaps learned to be very much

ashamed of his youthful passion for a little actress, whom he would not dream now of asking to be his wife.

As Betha conjectures it, her cheeks burn, and she feels shy and awkward, and hopes she shall never meet him again. After six years of absence, he knows that she is close at hand, and has not even the curiosity to inquire if she still remembers him as a friend.

Doubtless his father's and grandmother's precepts have had their proper effect by this time, and Rob is sensible enough to see how preferable are the acres of Baron's Court to the three-legged stool on which he once thought he could cheerfully drudge for life, for Betha's sake.

As the girl thinks thus, driving home to her hotel, the tears stand in her eyes. She has had but few real friends during her lifetime —which of us can say otherwise?—and she believes that Robert Frere would have made a faithful one. Her friends have proved like

the majority—enemies in misfortune, and constant only when there was anything to be gained by constancy.

She has plenty of acquaintances now, when her fame is at its zenith, and she is making thousands of pounds yearly. But were she to fail and be hissed off the stage to-morrow, Betha is sensible enough to know where her so-called 'friends' would be—slinking out of the way, and round the corners, whenever they heard her footstep. She believes that Robert Frere's friendship would have been stauncher than this ; that it would have stood the hailstorm of misfortune as well as the sunshine of prosperity.

She realises now that he was as superior to a man like Geoffrey Clifford, as an angel is to a mortal creature. But she had not the wit to appreciate his good qualities, and perhaps it is as well that he has forgotten her. She remembers that she refused to

leave the stage for his sake, and wonders if she had spent the last six years under the shadow of his love, whether her heart would have felt more contented and at peace than it does at present.

Betha loves her profession. A new character has the power still to kindle all the excitement of old days in her breast, and make her pant for distinction and applause. But when we have climbed somewhat wearily to the pinnacle of our ambition we may be grateful, but we are apt sometimes to feel a little tired. The conviction creeps over all of us, even at the moment of our proudest successes, that there is very little worth striving for under the sun. Here to-day, and gone to-morrow, and all our labour, talents, weaknesses, and virtues buried with us. When that supreme moment comes (as come it must for all), there will be but one thing we shall care for—a loving hand to grasp ours to the last. And the only man

who dies really poor and unsuccessful, is he who leaves this world unregretted and unsustained.

Bentham cannot imagine what has come to her young mistress after that 'at home' at Primrose Hill. She seems so dull and languid and unlike herself. So the good old creature urges the girl to take more diversion, and Betha, in order to please her, secures tickets, some few days after, for a morning performance at a fashionable theatre. What a curious fact it is, that whenever actors and actresses have a few hours in which to enjoy themselves, they invariably spend them in going to witness the dramatic performances of others. When the uninitiated would imagine they were riding on horseback, or rowing on the river, or lying in bed, or doing anything else to which they are most unaccustomed, they will find them in the stalls of a theatre, watching the efforts of their *confrères*—the first to

applaud and the last to cavil of anyone there.

Betha is no exception to this rule. She loves to sit before the foot-lights and legitimately enjoy herself, but on this occasion she has no one but old Bentham as a chaperon and companion, as Mrs. Henderson's widowhood is too recent to permit her to appear in public. However, this circumstance does not detract from Betha's pleasure, as she good-naturedly chats with her faithful old nurse, and explains everything that she does not understand to her.

The June sun is still in its glory, as about five o'clock they leave the theatre, and the crowd upon the pavement outside is very great.

Betha's brougham is some way down the line, and she sets off with Bentham to walk to it. The people press her on every side. Labourers returning from their work, flower-girls with baskets of pinks and roses, dirty

boys and women and children, jostle the smartly-dressed ladies and gentlemen who have issued from the theatre.

A fishmonger's apprentice, pushing his way along the pavement with a wooden tray of fish, nearly knocks Betha on the shoulder.

'Can't you see where you are going to?' cries Bentham in an angry tone, as her mistress, in trying to avoid contact with the tray, is nearly pushed into the arms of a shabby-looking woman who is slouching close by the wall of the building, as though to avoid observation.

'I beg your pardon!' says Betha courteously, and as she speaks, the woman gives vent to a slight exclamation. Betha raises her head quickly—their eyes meet—in a moment she has recognised *Mattie Levison.* At first, neither speaks. Surprise and horror chain Betha's tongue, and she thinks it would be a further humiliation to the fallen woman to acknowledge her before a crowd of

fashionable people, many of whom may have known her in her palmier days. But the next minute Mattie has glided hurriedly away, and then Betha feels she has been wrong. She cannot let her go thus—poor, poor Mattie! without one word of explanation.

'Stop here, Bentham!' she says authoritatively, as she turns and follows the footsteps of her former friend.

'Mattie—Mattie!' she exclaims in a low earnest voice, as she comes up with her, 'I know who you are! Do not run away from me! I am so anxious to befriend you if I can!'

The kind tones make the woman pause, but as she turns her face towards the full sunlight, Betha can hardly believe that it is her old schoolfellow. Misery and humiliation, rather than actual want, have made sad inroads on the beauty of Mattie Levison. The soft dark eyes and chiselled features remain, but the peach-like complexion has been

replaced by a sallow hue: the fair round cheeks have fallen in, and the glossy hair is rough and untidy. Her dress, moreover, is dowdy and shabby. No fresh lace nor ribbons adorn her person, and she might well pass for what Mrs. Henderson mistook her—a beggar woman.

'My poor Mattie! What can have brought you down to this?' cries Betha, sympathisingly.

'Hush, Betha! you had better not speak to me! Do go back to your friends.'

'I am not with friends; but if I were, I would leave them to speak to you! Do you think I have forgotten all your kindnesses to me in the bygone days? Mattie, I am not so ungrateful! Let me try and repay some of it now!'

'You had not much kindness to thank me for at the last,' replies Mattie.

The tears shine on Betha's lashes.

'You did not mean it! or if you did, I

have forgotten it by this time. Mattie, is *he* with you still?'

'Do you mean Clifford? Hardly so, my dear, or you would not have met me in this becoming costume. I have had to depend on myself for some years past.'

'Let me come home with you, Mattie.'

'I have no home!'

'But you must sleep under shelter.'

'There is a bedroom somewhere in the back slums of Westminster where I pass the night; but I cannot take you to it. It is not a fit place for you.'

'And yet you live there! Do you think the world has made me as conventional as that? Will you come back with me to my hotel instead?'

'No, no!' cries Mattie, shrinking; 'I could not do that, look at my dress.'

'Then I will return with you,' says Betha, decidedly. 'Will you wait here whilst I dismiss my servant?'

'Yes, if you wish it! I suppose I ought to refuse, but it is so strange to me now to hear a kind voice, Betha!'

Betha hurries back to Bentham and orders her to return home in the carriage, alone.

'But what will *you* go for to do, Miss Betha?' exclaims the old woman in dismay.

'Never you mind, Benty! I won't get into mischief. I have met an old friend, with whom I wish to have some conversation.'

'But hadn't the carriage better wait for you, my dear?'

'No! I shall return in a cab. Now, please do as I tell you, and ask me no more questions.' So the nurse is obliged to obey orders, and goes home, blessing and saving herself all the way.

'Come, Mattie,' says Betha, as she rejoins the poor downcast creature leaning against the wall, 'let me call a cab and drive you to your room.'

'Betha, I *cannot* take you there; it is so shabby.'

'I don't care what it is, I must speak to you, and we cannot talk in the open street. Tell me the address, there's a good girl.'

Mattie, after some hesitation, does as she is desired, and a few minutes' drive brings them to the spot. But, prepared as Betha was to see a bare and shabby room, she is shocked beyond measure at the squalid appearance of the apartment she is ushered into, and for a few minutes after they find themselves alone nothing is to be heard but the sound of her sobs—she is so completely overcome.

Mattie, meanwhile, has seated herself on a broken-down horsehair sofa by the window, and appears rather sulky.

'I told you not to come,' she says presently; 'I am no longer fit company for you in any way. You had much better leave me alone to die as I live.'

'I could not—*could* not do it,' exclaims Betha earnestly. 'These tears are only for yourself, dear Mattie! When I think of what you were in your father's house, surrounded with luxuries, made so much of, given you own way in everything; and then after that, living with your husband, though you were not so happy, you had everything you could require, and now to see you *here*, in this miserable room, I feel as if I should never get over it.'

'Well, crying won't do me any good, Betha,' replies Mattie, in a loud tone, 'nor will raking up unpleasant memories. I have made my own bed, you see, my dear, and I must lie on it. I have to thank your fine friend Mr. Clifford for the ruin of my life, and I only wish he had been dead and buried before I ever set eyes on his hypocritical face.'

A slight shiver of repugnance runs through Betha's frame. She cannot understand any

woman mentioning the man she has professed to love in a tone of such contempt, even though his conduct has wounded and disappointed her. Betha has no reason to love the memory of Geoffrey Clifford, but she could not speak otherwise than sadly of him. It were far easier to her not to speak at all.

'Tell me of all that has happened to you, my poor Mattie,' she says presently, 'and let us see if there is no way to be found out of this cruel dilemma.'

'All is soon told, Betha. It is the old story that each woman who makes a fool of herself has to repeat in turn. I ran away with Geoffrey Clifford, and lived with him at Paris and Vienna, and half a score of other places, and thought, when I was free, that he would marry me. But, on the contrary, when that time arrived my gentleman told me he had other views, and left me in the lurch to get on as best I might by myself.'

'Do you mean to say he made no provision for you?' exclaims Betha, with flashing eyes. 'How cruel! How heartless! I could not have believed it.'

'*Provision!* I should think not. I had about five pounds in my purse when he left me, and I have worked for my living ever since.'

'And how long is that ago, Mattie?'

'About three years.'

'Is Clifford on the stage still?'

'I don't know—I have never asked. Someone told me a short time back that he was in America or Australia—but what does it matter to me? I wouldn't touch a farthing of his money if he were to offer it to me, the false-hearted hound.'

'That is right, Mattie,' replies Betha, sympathetically. 'But how do you live, dear?'

'By working the sewing-machine: I am employed in a large shop on Ludgate Hill, and have been for the last two years. The

manager was awfully kind. I had no character, you know, and had had no experience, so I couldn't get a situation anywhere. Getting employment in London is very much like getting into Heaven, as your parsons teach it. The Almighty won't hear your prayers unless you repent, and you can't repent unless He makes you, and He won't make you unless you pray. So the employers say they cannot give you work unless you have had some experience, and you can't get experience until you have had some work. Logical, isn't it? However, I went to my present manager and told him who I was, and my whole story; I found it was the best way, and he put me on the staff at once, and I have worked for him ever since. I don't earn more than eighteen to twenty shillings a week, you know. It keeps me in food and lodging—such as it is; but it leaves very little over for ruby velvet hats and ostrich feathers. Do you remember my ruby velvet hat, Betha?' concludes

Mattie, with a harsh laugh.' 'Now, don't turn on the waterworks again, you silly thing. You were always a softhearted little fool, Betha, and I considered myself the more worldly wise of the two, but you have made a better business of your life, after all, than I have.'

'Mattie! I have heard of your poor father's death; but why don't you apply to your brothers? I suppose they have the business now, haven't they?'

'Apply to them! Why, Betha, I should get driven from the doors! They are both married, and as proud as peacocks. Alfred's wife is a woman of title—Lady Sarah Rothesey, and lives in a splendid house in Princes' Gate; and Lionel married the daughter and heiress of one of our richest diamond merchants. I *did write* to them.'

'And what answer did you receive?'

'Alfred sent me word that if I presumed to go near Princes' Gate, or introduce myself

to Lady Sarah's notice, he would put me in charge of the police; and Lionel (my favourite brother Lionel, of whom I used to be so proud) returned me my own letter torn in two.'

'How *could* they be so cruel?' gasps Betha.

'My dear child! it is no more than I deserved. I ought to have known it all beforehand; but I think, if—if—my poor father had lived,' says Mattie, with a sob, 'that he might still have been reconciled to me.'

'And you were not mentioned in his will?'

'Oh no! My brothers took care my name should be erased from that.'

'But they cannot know you are working for your daily bread, and under your own name, Mattie. They would be ashamed to let you continue to do so, for their own sakes.'

'They *do* know it; and they are not ashamed, Betha, of anything — except me. And I will never appeal to them again—not if I starve to death for want of my daily bread.'

Betha looks at the pretty delicate face turned to the sky—pretty still, in spite of its thinness and pallor—and at the graceful attenuated figure; and a grand thought comes into her mind.

'Do you remember the *tableaux vivants* we had in Albert Gate, Mattie?'

'Yes,' says the other, languidly.

'How beautiful you looked, dear; and how much you enjoyed them.'

'Yes! and how often I have wished since that I had gone on the stage with you, Betha. I should have been a happier and a richer woman. Yes—and a more virtuous one, into the bargain, than I am now. But I remember, though I admired your courage and talent, I pitied you for the drudgery you would have to undergo. Indolence was

always my great fault. I little thought then that when you were at the top of the tree I should be working at a sewing-machine for twelve hours a day to earn my crust of bread.'

'Mattie, we must change all that,' says Betha.

'It is impossible, dear! Don't attempt it. You can't change *me,* you know, and the best thing I can do is to remain in obscurity for the rest of my life.'

'While *he* flaunts about somewhere in the midst of fashionable society!' cries Betha, indignantly.

'Ah! that is the law of the world, Betha! It cannot be helped, and it will never be altered.'

'But I for one will never subscribe to it,' says stout-hearted Betha. 'You were my kind friend in prosperity, dear Mattie, and I will never, *never* cease to be your friend now.'

'Oh! Betha, darling! you are too good for this world,' cries Mattie, breaking down; and then the two women fall into each other's arms, and cry heartily.

'And you will let me do the best I can for you,' says Betha, at last, wiping her eyes; 'and you will promise not to oppose my endeavours, Mattie?'

'I will promise to follow your advice in all things, my dear kind generous friend,' replies the other; and then Betha discovers it is six o'clock, and is obliged to hurry away to be in time for the theatre. But she pledges herself to return to that humble apartment before many days are over, and leaves a streak of sunshine behind her, such as has not illuminated it since poor Mattie Levison sought a refuge there.

CHAPTER X.

'I AM IN SUCH A SCRAPE.'

Betha was afraid to tell Mattie of the grand idea that flashed into her mind concerning her, for fear her scheme might fail and produce further disappointment. But for the rest of that day, and several days afterwards, she ponders over it and works it out, until it assumes feasible proportions and becomes a plan, not only to be thought of, but put into execution. And that it involves somewhat of a sacrifice on her own part renders it no less charming in the eyes of loving-hearted Betha Durant.

Her old employer and manager, Mr.

Cheyne, of the Theatres Royal of Buton and Byton, under whose auspices she commenced to make her name, is naturally very anxious to secure her appearance on his boards when her London engagement comes to a termination. He has hardly, however, ventured to do more than hint at such a thing to Betha; for the successful actress, who has made herself famous throughout the United States, and is turning the heads of half London at the present moment, is a very different person, in Mr. Cheyne's eyes, from the self-depreciating girl who asked him in a transport of trembling hope and fear if he thought it possible she could play Juliet.

He little guesses how fresh and unchanged her stage-life has still left Betha, nor how an appeal to her generosity or her gratitude would have made her yield to his wishes without demur. She, on the other hand, has had more than one reason for hesitating

to take any definite notice of Mr. Cheyne's suggestion.

The proximity of Buton to Baron's Court and Black Abbotts has made the idea of revisiting that town distasteful to her, lest Robert Frere and his friends should imagine that from putting herself in their way she desired a renewal of their intimacy. And then she has been so beset by offers to visit the provinces, that she has hardly thought she would be doing herself justice to accept the moderate terms which she knows her old manager will give her.

But now she sits down, and without question of salary, offers herself for a month's engagement at the Buton Theatre as soon as she is released from the 'Pompeian.'

'I must not disguise from you, dear Mr. Cheyne,' she writes, 'that my proposal is not entirely a disinterested one. An old schoolfellow of mine has been forced by change of circumstances to earn her own

iving, and I want to place her on the stage under your care. I do not know if she has any particular talent for the profession, but she is very beautiful; and if my dear old crony, Kate Montalambert, will let her live with her, as I used to do, and you will give her anything her services may be worth to you, *I* will stand guarantee for any further expenses she may incur. But this must be a great secret between you and me, dear Mr. Cheyne, because my poor friend, Miss Norton, is very proud, and would never accept any assistance from me if she knew it was such. If you will do this for the sake of an old acquaintance, I will pledge myself to devote any month after July on which you may decide to the prosperity of the dear old Buton Theatre; and tell Kate that I shall expect her to be my guest during that month, or I will never speak to her again.'

Mr. Cheyne is only too delighted to get the promise of the 'great Miss Selwyn's'

services, on any terms; and writes back a cordial acquiescence by return of post. He offers Betha one hundred pounds a week, to appear in a round of her favourite characters: and he will be pleased to engage her friend Miss Norton at a commencing salary of twenty shillings. Such is the broad margin between a name and none.

Betha laughs to herself as she reads the old rogue's letter. She knows that in a large city like Buton she will be worth her thirty to fifty pounds a night to him, yet she does not attempt to procure higher terms.

He is going to give Mattie another chance to get on in this hard world, and that is all Betha really cares for. She can trust her poor friend's comfort to the kind heart of Kate Montalambert, and believes that if she proves to have the least talent for the stage, her beautiful face will do the rest.

So she agrees with Mr. Cheyne that he

shall profess to pay Miss Norton two pounds a week, and the extra money will come out of her own pocket. And whilst these arrangements are pending, she goes backward and forward to Mattie's room, and never without leaving some token of her gracious presence behind her, in the shape of wine, or fruit, or game; until the poor creature's cheeks begin once more to glow with the pleasures of renewed hope and generous fare, and her crushed spirit to re-assert itself beneath the knowledge that she still has a friend.

Meanwhile, another event occurs of a still more distressing nature to Betha than her re-encounter with Mattie Levison—one, too, which she feels at first more powerless to assuage or minister to. For it concerns Hyacinth, who rushes into the hotel one morning, whilst Betha is seated at breakfast, and without preamble casts herself on her knees with her head in her sister's lap, and

bursts into a flood of tears. Betha is infinitely shocked and alarmed.

Hyacinth is not—like herself—a soft-hearted fool, ready to melt at the first note of distress from others; and why she should be kneeling there, crumpling her fresh muslin dress without the slightest remorse, and crying as if her heart would break, frightens her sister beyond all telling.

'My darling child!' she exclaims, tenderly; 'what *can* be the matter? Is papa ill, or Mrs. Durant, or have you quarrelled with Lord Desborough? Do speak to me, Cinthy! Don't keep me in this terrible suspense. You cannot tell how anxious and alarmed you make me feel!'

But Cinthia only cries on, and smears her wet face against Betha's, and kisses her vehemently.

'Cinthy, it is very unkind of you to behave like this. You will make yourself ill. And you are frightening me beyond measure.'

'Oh, Betha! I have got into such a terrible scrape! I don't know what on earth I shall do! I wish I was dead!'

'Is that all?' cries her sister, joyfully. 'Oh, Cinthy! we will get out of it together. You cannot have fallen into any scrape that has not its remedy.'

'I don't know that, Betha. This is the worst I have ever been in. I should not dare tell papa or mamma, for the world. In fact, I could not tell anybody but you, dear. But I feel as if you will help me, and I know you won't scold me, and so—and so—I have come to you.'

Betha's beautiful eyes glow with the sacred light of gratitude.

'Thank God!' she says, solemnly. 'Oh! I am so glad you came to me, my Cinthy. Now, we are real sisters and friends, and we will help one another, and share this trouble between us, and bear it equally, if

we find it has to be borne. What is at the bottom of it, darling?—money?'

For Betha's sole idea of a young lady's 'scrape' is either extravagance or a lover's quarrel. She cannot imagine how a carefully brought up girl can have the opportunity to get into any other sort of trouble. Yet Hyacinth shakes her head dolefully.

'Oh no, Betha! it isn't money!'

'Then you have been naughty enough to say or do something to vex Lord Desborough. I am sorry for that, Cinthy, because I think he is such a good kind little man, and will make you so indulgent a husband. But I am sure I can set matters right between you, if you will give me leave to try.'

But still Hyacinth shakes her pretty head, with its flushed, tear-stained face and tumbled curls.

'Not Desborough—and not money!' says Betha, wistfully. 'Then, darling, I am quite at a loss to guess what it can possibly be.'

'You won't be angry with me if I tell you, Betha? Promise me.'

'Angry with you, dear, *dear*, child! don't think it for one minute! Why am I to be angry with you, my darling, whatever you may have done? I, who have committed so many foolish and wrong actions myself, which I am ashamed to look back upon or remember.'

'You, Betha!' ejaculates Hyacinth, with open eyes. 'Have you really? Oh! that *is* a comfort to know! You always seem so awfully good and proper to me, that I thought you had never done a silly or a naughty thing in the whole course of your life.'

'What an arch hypocrite I must be,' replies her sister, with a faint smile; 'I only wish I could live the last ten years over again, Cinthy. They should show a different record from what they do now! But never mind talking about me! Tell me all your

troubles, dear, and rely on my help and my sympathy.'

'How shall I ever begin!' exclaims Hyacinth with a blush of real shame; 'but you remember what I told you up in the bedroom at Primrose Hill, Betha, the very first day you came there.'

'About Mr. Claverton! Yes, dearest, I remember perfectly. But you have altogether given up his acquaintance, haven't you, Cinthy? You never meet him now as you used to do?' demands Betha, in an anxious voice.

Cinthy pouts her red lips.

'How can you ask me if I ever meet him now, Betha, when you know he dined at our house only last week?'

'You know what I mean, dearest! You have not made any secret appointments with Mr. Claverton since that day when we talked of it together, and you promised me to give up his acquaintance altogether.'

'Betha! it is much easier to promise than to perform. What *is* a girl to do when a man is always bothering her, and writing to her, and saying dangerous things in public, that anyone may overhear and catch the meaning of.'

'Am I to understand then, Hyacinth, that you *have* broken your promise, and met Mr. Claverton again without the knowledge of your father or Mrs. Durant.'

'Betha, dear! don't be cross, but I really couldn't help it. I had no alternative, he threatened me so.'

'*Threatened you!* What, Mr. Claverton? What right can he have to threaten you? What hold has he over you?'

'Oh, Betha! you forget the letters I have written to him!' exclaims Hyacinth, recommencing her sobs.

'Don't cry, child, if you can help it. I want to understand this business thoroughly. Tell me everything, Cinthia, the *very worst*,

for heaven's sake! Try to think I am your mother, darling, and let me hear everything that you have said and done.'

'Oh, Betha! I am sure you will be angry, but I couldn't help it! I told you we had corresponded frequently during the last year through the Vigo Street post-office. Well, I received a letter from him the day before yesterday, to say he had something of the greatest importance to tell me, and begging me to meet him the next morning at the old place.'

'The scoundrel,' says Betha, with closed teeth, 'to take such advantage of a young girl's trust! where is the "old place," Cinthia?'

'I dare not tell you!'

'You *must* tell me! I *will* know it!' cries the elder girl, fiercely. But the next moment she is cooing over her weeping sister like a turtle-dove. '*Do* tell me, my sweet one!

Tell your own Betha, and I will keep your secret from all the world.'

'I went to his chambers—at least he took me there,' says Hyacinth with downcast eyes.

'*What!*' exclaims Betha, loudly.

In all her experience she has never heard of such a thing before; that a young lady should visit a bachelor's rooms without a chaperon, and she feels as if she would like to kill the man who has dared to entice her sister into such an indiscretion.

'They are beautiful rooms,' continues Hyacinth, hurriedly, 'and many ladies visit them. He has told me so. There is nothing wrong in it, Betha.'

'It is very unusual,' replies her sister, gravely; 'but go on, dear Cinthy, and I will not interrupt you again.'

'When we got there, Gervase began reproaching me for neglect and unkindness, and asked me to contradict the report that I

am going to marry Lord Desborough. And you know, Betha, it had just been settled between papa and Desborough that the marriage is to take place the end of the season, and mamma and I had been talking of my dresses and all that; and so I thought it would be an excellent opportunity to tell Mr. Claverton that it was really true; but—but——'

'Well, you did quite right,' says Betha, 'and only what you promised me you would do, Cinthia; but I wish you had written it, instead of meeting that horrid man again.'

'Oh, but it was of no use!' exclaims Hyacinth, breaking down again as the difficulty of her situation is recalled to her mind. 'It is all over, Betha. I shall never marry Desborough. Gervase is determined I shan't do it, nor anybody, in fact, but himself. And I don't want to marry him! I don't care for him any more: he was so

unkind to me yesterday, and he hasn't got any money, and I wish that I was dead,' concludes the girl, irrelevantly.

'Hyacinth dear! you must try and be more coherent. Mr. Claverton was very angry when you told him you were engaged to marry Lord Desborough. I am not surprised at that, and if he reproached you for your deception, it is part of the penalty of wrong-doing, and you must bear it patiently on that account.'

'But the letters, Betha! He has got all my letters, and he says if I do not break off my engagement with Desborough, that he will send them to him. So what am I to do? Oh! they are *awful* letters—it's of no use disguising the truth. I think I must have been mad when I wrote them, but he *promised* to tear them up. But he hasn't; and he says if I had written them in Scotland, they would have carried my condemnation with them, and the law would have

pronounced me to be his wife, whether I liked it or no.'

Betha has grown very pale during this narrative, but her face has settled into a look of quiet determination.

'But, fortunately for you, Cinthia, the letters were *not* written in Scotland, and no power on earth can make you this bad man's wife against your will. He must be a bad worthless man—first to tempt you to a dishonourable action, and then to threaten you with exposure if you do not carry it out.'

'Yes! he *is* bad,' says Cinthy, eagerly, 'for he has told me again and again he had destroyed my letters, and I've burned all his, so there is no proof against him in return. But he swore that if I did not write to him by to-night's post, to say I had broken off my engagement with Lord Desborough, he should send him the packet of letters the first thing to-morrow morning. And if he does, we shall never be married, Betha! I

know Lord Desborough would never forgive me, for he has said again and again that the only thing he would never overlook in his future wife, is deception.'

'He has said the same to me,' replies Betha, 'and I admire him for it.'

'But you don't know how dreadful those letters are,' continues Cinthia. 'I believe if he saw one of them, it would be all over between us. You see I thought I was so much in love with Gervase at first, and afterwards I didn't like to say I wasn't, and so I wrote all sorts of things about when we should be married, and so forth; and it is most shabby of him to have kept the letters, and refuse to give them up. And now what *am* I to do, Betha! Oh! do—*do* help me out of this awful scrape, and I will love you the best of all the world to my very life's end.'

Betha returns her sister's kisses warmly, but she looks very grave.

'It is a very, *very* serious scrape, Cinthia,

that you have got into, and though I will do my best to help you, I cannot be sure of success. But before I move in the matter I must be assured of two things! First, do you intend to marry Lord Desborough? and before you do so, will you make a clean breast to him of the whole affair?'

'But, Betha, he won't marry me if I do—I know he won't.'

'I believe he will, and love you all the more for your courage and frankness. Anyway, I cannot assist you upon any other terms. I will not lend myself to a second deceit, Cinthia.'

'You don't know Desborough!' says the younger girl, shaking her head.

'Then I don't want to know him! If he can be hard and ungenerous in a case like this, I would rather see you dead than married to him. Come, darling! think of what mother would have advised you to do, and make up your mind!'

'I will trust it all to you,' whispers Cinthy.

'Then the first thing you must do, is to sit down and write a letter to Mr. Claverton, making an appointment with him at his chambers for to-morrow morning.'

'Betha! are you in earnest?'

'I am!'

'When you said I was so wrong to go there yesterday—and you wish me to go again!'

'I don't intend you should go again, but it is quite necessary you should make the appointment in your own name, or Mr. Claverton will not keep it. And *I* will go to his rooms, Cinthia—and demand the restoration of your letters.'

'Betha! if anybody should meet you coming or going! Won't it be worse for you than for me, because your face is so well known in London?'

Betha bites her lip, but remains resolute.

'Thank you, dear little sister, for thinking of my good name before your own! I will disguise myself as best I can, Cinthia, but it is imperative I should apply for these letters in person. I think when Mr. Claverton finds that your sister is Elizabeth Selwyn, he will not consider it worth his while to court so public an exposure as I could make of his infamous behaviour.'

'He knows you are my sister, and I don't think he wants to meet you,' says Hyacinth, 'for I have asked him so often to come to our house in the afternoons, and he never has.'

'Whether he wishes to meet me or not, he will have to do it,' replies Betha, 'and we shall not part until we have come to an explanation with each other. Courage, my dearest sister. You have been very foolish and imprudent, but this will I trust be the last scrape you will ever get into, for Desborough's sake. You *do* love Lord Des-

borough, don't you, Hyacinth, for all your giddy way of talking?'

'I like him—a little!' admits the girl; 'and I think if I were well out of this business, and he forgave me for it, I should like him very much.'

'You *shall* get out of it, and he shall forgive you!' exclaims Betha, decidedly. 'Keep up your heart, Cinthy. This fellow Claverton has no real power over you. He is simply making a cowardly attempt to coerce you to his own will. But he will talk very differently when he sees me. So now sit down, and write a letter to him, simply saying you will be at his rooms to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock.'

'Oh, Betha! how very, *very* glad I am I came to you! I had been crying half the night, not knowing what on earth to do, and then this happy inspiration came into my head. And you really think you will get

the letters?' says Hyacinth, as she delivers her envelope to Betha's care.

'Dearest child,' replies her sister, 'be assured I will not leave his presence without them. To hear you say what you have done just now, is the greatest happiness my life has known, and I would do twice as much as this, in return for it.'

CHAPTER XI.

'WHAT REWARD SHALL I RECEIVE?'

Hyacinth Durant returns home after this interview in the highest spirits, and the fullest trust in her sister's power to unravel the tangled web she has woven for herself. She is so careless and thoughtless by nature, and the training of the present day has kept her so unprincipled, that she feels no regret whatever for the deception she has practised, nor the imprudence of which she has been guilty. The risk she runs is the only thing that affects her; and she believes that, thanks to her sister's promise, that danger is already past.

How little do parents, who confide their daughters during the most pliant years of their existence to the tainted atmosphere of a 'ladies' boarding-school,' realise the fact that no after fault-finding nor coercion will eradicate the seeds of folly which are sown by girls in one another's minds.

Mothers, as a rule, send their daughters from their sides at the very time when they need their supervision most, and the pert idle little girl of twelve, who is banished from home, perhaps, because she will not learn her lessons with her governess, is returned upon their hands at seventeen or eighteen—an awkward, unformed gawk, with as little useful knowledge as she has manners—a creature who is no companion in solitude, and something to be ashamed of in society, but who knows as much of this world's evil as her mother, and thinks of it a great deal more. Is there anything on earth so little interesting as a giggling whispering school-

miss? The female colleges, which have made such advanced strides in public favour during the last few years, are the only means by which a girl can be, at one and the same time, thoroughly educated and modestly reared—where she receives the training of a man by day, and returns to the bosom of her mother at night. May they flourish and increase, until they have exterminated every 'ladies school' from the land!

Hyacinth Durant has been dragged up after the old fashion—sometimes taken abroad by her step-mother, and confided to the care of a French maid, and sometimes left at home at the first boarding-school that happened to be convenient. So that she has become a woman half educated, wholly untrained, with no care for anyone but herself, and no fear except the fear of being found out. It had been better for her to be cast on the world like her elder sister, and left to the impulses of her own nature.

If Hyacinth returns to Primrose Hill rejoicing, poor Betha, left behind in Piccadilly, feels very differently. She does not regret the task she has undertaken; on the contrary, when she thinks of her sister's story, and the unwarrantable manner in which Mr. Claverton has taken advantage of her youth and imprudence, Betha knits her brow, and clenches her teeth, and feels like a tigress about to be robbed of her young. But she cannot disguise from herself that she has promised to embark on a very questionable undertaking. To be pledged to go alone to the chambers of a stranger, and there accuse him of villany and cowardice, is sufficient to make the courage of even a very strong-minded young woman quail.

Once or twice Betha contemplates the advisability of taking Bentham with her as a witness and protector, but on second thoughts she dismisses the notion as unsound. There must be no witness but herself to the proofs

of the folly of the future Lady Desborough; and in deciding thus, Betha thinks as much of the little viscount's feelings, as she does of those of her sister. Hyacinth's folly does not deserve a shield, but Lord Desborough's affection for and trust in her is worthy of the utmost consideration. So for his sake, if not for Cinthy's, our heroine determines to carry out her unpleasant duty by herself. She does not sleep well, though, on the night preceding it. Though she is tired with a long performance, she tosses and tumbles through the dark hours, and when old Bentham comes to call her in the morning, she exclaims at the pale, anxious face that meets her gaze:

'Lord-a-mercy! Miss Betha, whatever have you been a-doing to yourself? Why, you're as white as a lily, and your eyes look as if you hadn't had a wink of sleep all night.'

'I haven't slept much, nurse, and that's the fact.'

'Well, you just lie abed, my dearie, and I'll bring your breakfast up here.'

'Not a bit of it!' cries Betha, springing from her couch. 'Why, it's half-past nine already, and I have an appointment at eleven!'

'At eleven! Whatever should take you out so early, Miss Betha? It's a most unreasonable hour, my dear, considering what you go through at night.'

'Never mind, nurse; unreasonable or not, I must keep my appointment. So please plait up my hair, and don't talk to me!'

She wants to think over the coming interview, and decide what she shall say to Mr. Claverton, but she cannot make up her mind, and rises from her toilet as uncertain as before.

When she finally quits the hotel, which to Bentham's dismay she insists upon doing on foot, she is attired in a black dress and bonnet, a large cloak which envelopes her

whole person and a thick veil, and flatters herself that she is unrecognisable.

Unfortunately, however, the mere fact of a lady veiling her charms in London is sufficient to excite the curiosity of the crowd concerning them, and the veriest hag may create a temporary excitement by shrouding her features from the public gaze.

I recommend the plan to such of my female readers as cannot get up a sensation by displaying them.

Betha Durant, however, is quite satisfied with the security of her disguise, and has her mind, indeed, too much occupied by more serious matters to permit her to concentrate much attention on her own appearance.

The distance between Piccadilly and the chambers of Mr. Claverton is so small that she thinks nothing of the walk, and is glad of the opportunity it gives her for reflection. But when she arrives at the given address, her courage nearly deserts her.

The hall-door is open; yet she does not know whether to stand within its shelter, and thus be seen, as it were familiar with the premises, by any passer-by, or on the door-step, where she will form a more noticeable object, but may be thought to have mistaken the number.

She looks up the street and down the street which faces the river. There is really no one in view except a few ragamuffins shying stones over the embankment.

In another moment (thinks Betha) some one may appear, and it will be too late to enter without observation.

She examines her watch: it is ten minutes past the hour. So, with a face pale as ashes beneath her veil, she hurriedly mounts the steps, and rings the bell above the name of The Honourable Gervase Claverton.

A man-servant appears, who is evidently prepared for her coming, for she has scarcely

stammered out an inquiry for his master, before he opens a door on the ground-floor and ushers her into a private apartment, which is half dining-room and half library, and bears every evidence of having been furnished by a man of taste.

But Betha is too agitated to examine anything about her. The engravings, and bronzes, and specimens of china, which are scattered over the room, swim before her gaze, and the moments seem hours, until a door communicating with an inner apartment turns on its hinges, and a gentleman enveloped in the most artistic of dressing-gowns enters the room.

London chambers are proverbially dark, even in the summer season, and Betha is standing in the shade of the window-curtain, so that Mr. Gervase Claverton mistakes her at first for his expected visitor.

'My darling child,' he says familiarly, 'I guess the reason of the honour you do me,

and it is really too good of you to bring me the news yourself!'

But the black-robed figure on the hearth-rug does not advance to meet him.

'Mr. Claverton,' she replies in a low voice, and with her head still down, 'I am not Hyacinth Durant.'

The gentleman is taken completely aback.

'Then who the devil—I beg your pardon—who on earth are you?'

'I am her sister the actress, Elizabeth Selwyn!' replies Betha, raising her veil and her eyes at the same moment.

But as she encounters the face of Mr. Gervase Claverton, she feels as if she had been struck with a sudden blow.

Every drop of blood in her body seems to change place. It rushes like a boiling torrent to her head and eyes, and then recedes slowly, and settles like liquid ice about her heart.

She wants to speak, but she cannot

articulate the words. Her tongue seems to have swelled, and her palate to have become harsh and dry.

So all she can do is to stare at him—hard and fixedly—and utter a sound that is half a cry of horror and half a groan. For the man before her—the Honourable Gervase Claverton—is Geoffrey Clifford the actor, the betrayer of poor Mattie Levison: her sister's lover and her own!

And Betha feels humbled and ashamed—more than could be put down in words—to remember that it should be so!

Mr. Claverton is naturally beforehand with her in the task of recognition. Directly Betha mentioned her name, he guessed what was before him, and nerved himself for the ordeal. And the first card he plays is to pretend that all is right between them, and he has done nothing worthy of condemnation.

'My dear Miss Selwyn!' he exclaims airily,

as he comes forward with an outstretched hand. 'Is it possible I see you again? How delighted, how charmed I am! I should have intruded myself upon your notice long ago, to congratulate you on your extraordinary success, had I imagined you preserved the least remembrance of the happy time we spent at the old Marlborough together.'

But Betha shrinks backward from his proffered hand as though it had been a snake with power to sting her.

'And so *you* are Gervase Claverton,' she says slowly, but with marvellous distinctness; '*you* are the man who has been making love to my sister, Hyacinth Durant, and persuading her to meet you, alone and without the knowledge of her father and mother!'

The tone of contempt in which she speaks the words is too much even for the equanimity of Mr. Claverton, and he visibly changes colour, as he replies:

'And why not, my dear Miss Selwyn? When a young and charming lady like Miss Hyacinth Durant is condescending enough to show favour to an undeserving object like myself, would you have *me* the one to refuse to second her amiable intentions?'

'And you knew she was *my* sister!' says Betha, bitterly.

Gervase Claverton is forced to have recourse to playing with a paper-knife before he answers her. He is too great a coward to look this girl full in her honest eyes and tell a lie.

'I did so—*afterwards*—not at first,' he murmurs. 'If you remember, I never knew you under any name but that of Selwyn. But had it been otherwise, would it have made any difference, Betha? Though you may not believe it, I received my death-blow one night in old Henderson's little parlour, and it has been of small consequence to me since *who* came across my path, so long as

they were willing to afford me such mild amusement as may be extracted from the flattery of silly women.'

'It was for this honourable purpose, then, I presume,' cries Betha, 'that you persuaded my unfortunate friend Mattie Levison to leave her husband's protection, and then deserted her to work for her living, or die of starvation — it little signified to you which.'

'Who told you that?' he demands eagerly.

'I have heard it from Mattie's own lips.'

'Is she in town, then? Have you her address?'

'I decline to answer your questions, Mr. Claverton, and under any circumstances I should refuse to tell you where she is. It is enough for you to know that she hates and despises you, as thoroughly as you deserve, for your cowardly and inhuman conduct towards her.'

'Miss Selwyn! you had better be cautious.

These are dangerous terms to use to a man.'

'If you killed me for them I would still tell you what I think. And more than that, Mr. Claverton! I have come here, to-day, for the sole purpose of receiving back my sister's letters from your hands—the letters she has been silly enough to write to you; and I shall not leave the house until I have them!'

'And supposing—as a man of honour—I refuse to deliver up a young lady's correspondence with myself; what then, Miss Selwyn?' he demands, with affected nonchalance.

'What then?' repeats Betha. 'Why, then I go straight from these rooms into the presence of her affianced husband, Lord Desborough, and tell him how you have trifled with his future wife.'

'I think that is hardly likely,' sneers Claverton.

'Is it not? You do not know me—nor Hyacinth, nor Lord Desborough, to say so! My sister has promised to have no further secrets from her *fiancé*, and has authorised me to act entirely on her behalf. The only difference will be this: If you will deliver those letters over to me, now—my sister says you have thirty-three in your possession—I will burn them before your eyes. If you refuse to do so, you will find yourself forced to give them up to my father, Major Durant; and he and Lord Desborough will read their contents, and learn the full extent of your dishonourable conduct with respect to my sister. Consider which will be best for yourself. I know you are too selfish to think either of her, or of me.'

'You speak without knowledge, Betha. I would do a great deal more than that, for one kind word or look from you.'

'You will be forced to do it without either, Mr. Claverton.'

'Indeed! It is a strange thing to me to hear anything like a threat from your lips. What a fool I was, ever to think you cared for me!'

There is nothing rouses a woman's spirit so quickly as to have a doubt expressed on the subject of her affection, by the man for whom she would have given up the world.

Her passion for him may have burned itself out; but she demands that he shall respect the ashes. And Betha, in common with most of her sex, cannot resist the temptation of letting Gervase Claverton know what he has lost.

'I *did* care for you!' she exclaims bitterly. 'I loved you as I had never loved any man in my life before—as I have never loved any man since. But my love for you is dead and buried long ago. It could not live, and weep, and pray for a dishonoured name, and you trailed yours in the dirt when you persuaded that unhappy woman to sacrifice herself for

you. And could you not be content with the ruin of *one* life, Geoffrey Clifford? Was it not sufficient to devastate *one* home, that you should attempt to drag a second victim through the same course of misery and crime?'

'No—no, Betha! for Heaven's sake, believe me, I never had any worse design with regard to your sister, than to wile away the hours of a life that hangs but too heavily on my hands. The same feeling induced me to carry on this aimless flirtation with Hyacinth, that prompted me to change my name and go upon the stage—a ceaseless craving for excitement and sensation, which I find impracticable in the humdrum routine of everyday existence.'

'And to this craving you would sacrifice the good name and principle of a young girl like my sister—even her virtue, I suppose, if opportunity had favoured your wickedness?'

'You are too hard upon me, Betha!'

'If you wish me to think so, give me back her letters, and promise me you will never try to cross her path again.'

'And what will you give me in return?'

'Let me have the letters, and I will tell you.'

Mr. Gervase Claverton has been considering the advisability of this step for some minutes previously. He remembers Betha Selwyn's determination of old, and feels that she will keep her word. On the whole, therefore, he has decided it will be preferable to fall into her hands than into those of her father.

'Remember! I shall expect a reward,' he says, as he unlocks a desk and places a packet of letters upon the table.

Betha glances over, and counts them hurriedly. They are all there—thirty-three in number—and they have undoubtedly been written by Hyacinth.

'Give me something to burn them with,' she says, with feverish haste. He lights a

match, and she kneels down before the empty fireplace and kindles one sheet after another, and watches them consume with eager eyes, until nothing remains upon the hearth but a heap of calcined ashes.

Then she rises to her feet with a deep sigh of relief, and turns towards the door.

'Stop—stop!' cries Gervase Claverton, eagerly. 'What are you going to give me in exchange for this?'

He has been watching her as she made a funeral pile of the proofs of her sister's folly; noting the graceful movements of her hands, and gazing at the pure and chastened beauty of her features, until all his old passion has revived in double force and poured back upon his heart in an overwhelming torrent. To think that this beautiful creature might have been his wife—that this genius whom the world has crowned, has confessed with her own lips how much she loved him! And then to remember he has lost her—lost her,

for the sake of Mattie Levison, and Hyacinth Durant, and half a score of others who are not fit to tie her shoestrings. The thought is madness.

'Stay, Betha!' he exclaims. 'Do not leave me without a word. Tell me what reward I shall receive for my obedience.'

Then she turns upon the threshold and confronts him with eyes that are very mournful, very tender, but very resolute. It is so hard for a woman, at any time, to bid farewell to what she has loved, even though it be but a festering corpse.

'Your compliance, Mr. Claverton,' she says, 'shall be rewarded by my forbearance. From this moment I will spare you the sight of a woman who is still the friend of Mattie Levison, and can never look at you in any other light than that of her destroyer.'

So she passes swiftly from his presence, and gains the street, agitated, but triumphant. She can breathe again now; she has accom-

plished her task, and Hyacinth and Desborough shall be made happy with the story of her success. But her cheeks are flaming with excitement—her eyes seem misty—the fresh air from the river blows on her heated face and makes her feel confused. She stands on the doorstep for a moment with her veil raised, looking up the street and down the street, and wondering which way she shall take to the Strand, when a footstep sounds upon the pavement behind her, and a gentleman leaving the next house looks at her in passing. Betha meets his gaze with a vivid blush, and then springs towards him, exclaiming:

'Rob! Rob! don't you know me? Oh, I am so pleased to see you!'

CHAPTER XII.

'WON'T YOU "TRY" TO LOVE ME?'

For the moment she forgets everything, excepting that her old friend Rob stands before her again. She forgets that she has been three months in London and he has not considered it worth his while to ascertain if his name is remembered by her; that he has even discussed her proximity with Blanche Chapman, and made some paltry excuse for not calling to renew their acquaintance. If she had had time to prepare herself for the meeting, these things would have weighed in the balance against Mr. Robert Frere, and Betha would probably have been cold and

reserved, and not her true self with him. But coming so suddenly and unexpectedly upon one another, leaves neither of them the opportunity for acting, and their mutual pleasure is genuine. As her voice falls on Rob's ears, the colour rushes to his face, and his features glow with excitement.

'Betha!' he exclaims in return, as their hands meet in a ready clasp, 'who would have dreamt of meeting you here?'

Then she recalls *where* she is, and blushes still more deeply.

'Why have you never come to see me?' she says reproachfully.

'Because—because——' he stammers.

'Because you have forgotten all about me, I suppose,' say Betha, with a faint laugh.

'Not so!' he answers. 'How could I, when all London is ringing with your name! Rather think that my modesty precluded my intruding the remembrance of so very obscure an individual as myself on your busy career.'

Has Rob grown sarcastic? Betha, glancing at him shyly from under her veil, perceives that he has at least grown much better looking than he promised as a boy—that his figure is broad and stalwart, and his bushy beard and moustaches add dignity to his appearance. But the brown short-sighted eyes are as gentle and tender in their expression as ever, and as she meets their gaze, she shrinks before it.

'But what are you doing here?' demands Mr. Frere, presently. 'Where are you going? You are the last person I should have expected to meet in this part of town! Surely, I did not see you leave No. 11?'

Betha feels the imputation conveyed by his earnest inquiries, and tries to brave it out.

'Yes! you did see me leave No. 11,' she answers briskly. 'I had some business to transact there which no one could do for me.'

'I hope that business was not with Mr. Gervase Claverton,' says Rob, in a low voice.

'I don't know what right you have to question me, Mr. Frere, but I am not ashamed of what I have been doing. My appointment *was* with Mr. Claverton. What of that? Is he not a gentleman?'

'I suppose so, in the eyes of the world!' he answers sadly; 'but I also know that he is the man who used to act with you under the name of Clifford, and who ran away with your pretty friend Mrs. Levison.'

Betha feels she has fallen into a trap.

'Perhaps I had business with him that concerned her!' she says. 'You might give me the credit for a good action, instead of a bad one, Rob!'

'I think nothing of you, Betha, but what is good! Only, customs may be different in America from what they are in England. And *here* it is not considered etiquette for a

lady to visit a gentleman in his bachelor chambers!'

'Oh, I am not a "lady," remember!' cries Betha, sharply; 'I am *only a common actress*, according to your grandmother's definition.'

'Did she define you so? I never heard her. Anyway, you will absolve me from having seconded the motion. But don't let us quarrel, Betha, after a separation of so many years!'

'I am sure I don't wish to do so,' replies the girl with a sob in her throat. 'I think it was you that began it, Rob! But tell me all about yourself! How are Sir Willoughby and Lady Frere? And have you settled down into a regular country gentleman by this time?'

He takes no notice of the last part of her remark.

'My father has been ailing for several months, Betha; and my grandmother, as you

may suppose, is a very old woman now—past seventy-five! I do not think that Baron's Court will know either of them for many more years!'

'How sad for you! And you—you are not married yet, I believe!' says Betha, with a wistful glance.

'No, not yet!' he answers.

There is a pause between them after that, and then Betha re-commences.

'Have you heard that I am on visiting terms again with my family—in fact quite *l'enfant gatée du maison*. Amusing, is it not, Rob? Six years ago I was the vilest of the vile, whose name my only sister was forbidden to mention. To-day, I am the great attraction at all their parties, and Mrs. Durant will not send out her cards of invitation until she has ascertained if I shall be disengaged, or not. And all the difference in me is, that I am at the top of the "accursed" tree instead of at the bottom.'

'*Is* that all the difference?' asks Rob, earnestly.

'Of course it is. What else do you imagine?'

'I wish I could think so! That during all these years you have kept the same fresh heart, as you have done the same face, which you took away with you to America.'

The conversation becomes embarrassing.

'Have I kept the same face?' repeats Betha, laughing. 'I flattered myself I was so much improved. Ditto, my disposition. But, Rob, Mrs. Durant thinks of neither of these things. She only recognises the fact that I am successful.'

'The most powerful word in the English Dictionary,' says Rob.

'The most hateful word,' replies Betha. 'What does "success" mean, except envy, malice, detraction, and the loss of all your dearest friends?'

'Is that a *necessary* consequence?' asks her companion.

'It is the usual one! Flatterers step in to divide you, and offer you the accomplishment of their own selfish ends in exchange for honest companionship and disinterested love.'

'You have already found out, then, that "all is not gold that glitters," Betha.'

'I knew that from the first, Rob! But have you heard of the brilliant marriage my sister, Hyacinth, is about to make, with Viscount Desborough!'

'Yes! I heard it from Miss Chapman. I must congratulate you.'

'Keep your congratulations for Hyacinth! By the way, you seem very intimate with my cousin Blanche, Mr. Frere! I think you must have some intentions in that quarter. Is it so?'

'Oh! decidedly,' replies Rob in his quiet matter-of-fact way. 'I have called at their

house exactly *once*, during the last four years.'

'But one may make great progress even in a single visit. At least, I should imagine so, from Blanche's manner of speaking. Nothing would induce her to give me your town address.'

'You asked for my address, then?' he returned eagerly.

'Oh no!' says Betha, hurriedly; 'at least, it was only mentioned in passing, and I was amused at her reticence. I was hardly likely to have made use of her information.'

'Hardly,' echoes Rob with a sigh.

'But you will come and see me now, Rob, will you not?'

She has given him her address, and they have been walking quietly towards Piccadilly during the course of their conversation.

As Betha puts the last question, and raises

her eyes to his, they are skirting the Green Park, and have arrived nearly opposite the hotel.

'You will come in and rest yourself for a little while,' she urges; 'I have so much to ask you about the Chapmans, and the people down at Black Abbotts.'

But Mr. Frere does not seem to share her enthusiasm. He hangs his head, and looks foolish.

'I think not, Betha! Thank you all the same. I have very little time to call my own, and must hurry back to my friends. Besides, I—I was always rather a rough plain-spoken sort of fellow, you know, and I don't think I should be good company for Mr. Gervase Claverton and others of your friends.'

'He is *not* my friend!' cries Betha, indignantly.

But Robert Frere takes no notice of her denial.

'Good-bye!' he says, as they reach the door of the hotel, and stand for a moment on the steps together; 'I hardly know whether I am glad or sorry to have met you this morning, Betha! We are very, *very* old friends, are we not? and you won't be offended if I speak to you like a brother. Be very careful what you do, or whom you know in London. It is a big, ungrateful, censorious city; and you are too much the cynosure of all its eyes to be able to throw dust in them! God bless you! God bless you!'

And wringing her hand with a violence that gives her pain, Robert Frere slouches his hat over his eyes, and walks rapidly back the same way they have come, leaving Betha standing on the doorstep in a state of the profoundest amazement.

This is quite a new phase of treatment to the young and beautiful actress, who has been adored by half her male acquaintances for the last six years.

Bobby Frere, who used to worship her shoe-string, has actually not only declined to visit her, but presumed to take her to task for not guarding her reputation with sufficient care!

As Betha remembers, with kindling cheeks, how, and where, he met her that morning, and the lame explanation she was alone enabled to give him, she acknowledges there may be some justification for the latter piece of officiousness. But, if he thinks she is in such peril of her good name, why should he refuse the opportunity of lecturing her a little more upon the subject?

The excuse he made was as invalid as the former one to Miss Chapman. He had very little time, and he must return to his friends.

Rubbish! As Betha thinks that her old lover has slighted her advances to him, she grows crimson with shame and annoyance, and taps her foot impatiently upon the floor.

Suddenly, she believes she has guessed the reason of Mr. Frere's apparent unwillingness to renew their acquaintance.

He is not married, but doubtless he is engaged, and he does not wish, nor intend, his future wife to be on visiting terms with *an actress.*

The good young man has come round at last to his papa's and his grandmamma's way of thinking, and sees his former base infatuation in its proper light. She has all London at her feet, but good Mr. Robert Frere considers her beneath his notice.

He is kind to her when they meet, for old acquaintance' sake; but they met quite by accident, although she has been on the 'Pompeian' boards for three months, and even then he *dared* to refuse her cordial invitation to her face.

'Very well, Mr. Frere! very well!' she thinks; 'if I chose to put my strength against yours, we should soon see which

would first tire of that sort of game! Why! I could bring you to my footstool in a week!'

And here the foot works still more violently, keeping time to Betha's rising passion.

'To be slighted!' she keeps on saying to herself, 'by a creature like that, whom I have known from a boy; and who was so absurdly devoted to me, that he would have drunk prussic acid if I had told him to do so. Why, he was nearly crazy about me at that period. How often he used to ask me to marry him, and when we broke off our engagement——'

But here, the circumstances which led to that breaking off, and part of which, at least, must have reached the ears of Robert Frere, recur to Betha's mind, and her mood changes as suddenly as it arose.

'Of course,' she argues, 'he has every right to despise me. What can I be think-

ing of? It is most unlikely he has not heard some stories about Geoffrey Clifford and myself, particularly as I fell ill, and went to America directly after his elopement with poor Mattie. And then to-day, he meets me on the very threshold of his house, and I am fool enough to brave out the fact that I went there. Oh, what an idiot I am! Why did I ever offer to interfere in other people's affairs? I am always doing something stupid, or wrong! And Rob thinks I am friendly with Mr. Clifford still, of course he does; and despises me for a bad unprincipled girl. And oh—oh—oh! How I wish to heaven, I had never met him!

And so the stubborn, haughty mood resolves itself into a penitential flood of tears, during which Betha makes a thousand resolutions to write to Rob, and explain the whole matter to him. But when she is able to reason calmly with herself, she sees this

is impossible, not only for Hyacinth's sake, but her own.

A second refusal would be too galling to her pride and her friendship. So Betha dries her eyes, and determines that things must remain as they are. She has a pleasanter task before her in going to Primrose Hill, to assure Hyacinth that her efforts have been successful; and when she feels her sister's kisses on her cheek, and hears her call her by all sorts of affectionate and caressing names in token of her gratitude, she can only be glad to have earned such a reward at any risk, and almost forgets her annoyance with regard to Robert Frere.

She finds Mrs. Durant and her step-daughter immersed in the tremendous responsibility of choosing the trousseau, and unable to converse on any subject except materials, and patterns, and trimmings.

The marriage is fixed for a month later,

and there will only just be time to procure what is necessary by the day itself.

'The third of August,' sighs Hyacinth; 'doesn't it seem horribly near? But you will be my principal bridesmaid, won't you, darling Betha? I have told mamma that I shall refuse to be married unless you are there.'

'Yes, Cinthy! certainly I will; that is, *on one condition*,' says Betha, drawing her aside.

'What is that? Should you prefer the dresses of any other shade?'

'No! my condition has nothing to do with colours. It is, that you should keep the promise you made to me yesterday, and tell Lord Desborough all about this affair with Mr. Claverton before you are married to him.'

Hyacinth bites her lip, and turns pale.

'Of course I will, Betha—didn't I say I would?—when a good opportunity occurs.

You don't suspect me of telling a story, do you?'

'No, darling! but the longer these disagreeable matters are put off, the harder they become. You may delay it for weeks, and find no better opportunity than the present. I saw Lord Desborough enter the library as I arrived. Come with me now, and let us tell him the truth at once.'

'Oh no—no, Betha! I couldn't, not now;' says Hyacinth, hanging back.

'Cinthy! be advised by me! It is like having a tooth out, dear, a wrench for the moment, but you will feel so much happier when it is over. Come! Mrs. Durant is busy, and will not observe our absence; and I promise you it shall be all over in ten minutes.'

'But he will be so angry,' remonstrates Hyacinth.

'No, he won't! Let *me* tell the story, and you may be sure I shall put the best face on

it I can! But even if he *is* angry, Cinthy, you must bear it; because, remember, *you have promised!*'

'Oh, what a worry you are!' cries Cinthia, looking as frightened as though Lord Desborough were indeed a dentist; 'why won't it do next week?'

'Because it must be to-day,' replies Betha firmly, as she drags her towards the library.

As they enter the room together, Lord Desborough starts up astonished at their appearance, they both look so pale and scared.

'What is the matter?' he exclaims. 'Is Cinthia ill?'

'No, Lord Desborough!' replies Betha, attempting to smile; 'Cinthia has never been better in her life, for she has come to make a little confession to you, which I have promised in your name, will raise instead of lower her in your estimation.'

'A confession!' repeats his lordship, still more puzzled; 'but pray be seated, both of you.'

'We would rather stand,' says Betha, quietly, with an arm round her sister's drooping form. 'Before Hyacinth met you, my lord, she had a foolish flirtation with a gentleman (whose name I do not think you will require from her), and in the course of it she received and answered several letters from him. There was never any serious intention on either side. The gentleman has returned my sister's letters, and we have destroyed them, and all communication between them henceforward will of course be dropped. But I thought—and Hyacinth thought—that it would not be strictly honourable in her to marry you until you had been informed of the circumstance; and therefore we came here to tell you. Don't be hard on her, Lord Desborough. She is very young, and she has been very imprudent;

but I can guarantee that her heart has not suffered in the transaction. I do not believe she ever cared for the man. She was dazzled by his good looks and admiration for herself.'

The little viscount has shuffled about, and looked very conscious and uneasy, during Betha's narration. But when it is concluded, he takes Hyacinth's two cold hands in his.

'Cinthia!' he says, shortly, 'is your sister's belief correct? Did you love that man?'

'No, Desborough! At least, I did at first just a little; but not—not since——'

'Since *when?* Since you loved *me?*'

He has supplied her with the cue. It would be so easy to answer him satisfactorily, even without words; and were Betha absent, Hyacinth, reared in a school of 'fibbing,' might be sorely tempted to do so. But she cannot lie in the presence of her sister's

truthful eyes. So she hesitates, and colours, and looks down. Lord Desborough rightly interprets her silence.

'What was it cured you of your affection for him, then, since it was *not* your love for me?' he demands fiercely.

'I could not care for him when I saw that he was selfish, and deceitful, and cared only for himself.'

'And am I selfish, and deceitful too, that you cannot care for me, even though you have agreed to marry me?' exclaims the viscount, in an accent of pain.

'Oh, Lord Desborough! please don't say that! I knew you would be angry, but Betha said if it were the case, I must bear it in punishment for my imprudence. And I think I would rather tell you all—the whole truth—whatever it may cost me, for I feel I shall be happier afterwards, and more worthy of my sister's love. I *do* love you a little—indeed—*indeed* I do; but I didn't

when I accepted you first. And all I thought of was, that you had a title, and lots of money, and I should be a viscountess. And I told Betha the first day she came here, that you were a prude, and a—a—prig, and a—a—booby,' says Hyacinth, breaking down into sobs. 'But I don't think I quite meant it, and I am very sorry now. And oh, Betha! take me in your arms and kiss me, for he'll never marry me, and I shall have no one but you to love me to my life's end,' concludes Cinthia, as she throws herself upon her sister's bosom.

'My own brave child!' says Betha, fondly kissing the head of brown curls that lies upon her shoulder; 'if Lord Desborough does not love you the better for this painful confession, he cannot know how to appreciate true courage, and truth, and honour, when he sees them.'

'And this is your teaching then, Miss

Selwyn,' says Lord Desborough, as he glances admiringly at Betha.

'No—no!' is her disclaimer; 'it is the teaching of Cinthy's own heart.'

'But it was Betha who read my heart for me, Lord Desborough, and showed me all that was vain and deceitful in it. It was she who brought me to your side now to tell you what I should have been too great a coward to confess by myself. And now let us go back, dear sister! Lord Desborough knows the worst that I can tell him, and I shall consider our engagement over from to-day.'

'But won't you even *try* to love me?' says his lordship with comical dismay.

'If you still wish me to try,' replies Hyacinth, coyly. And Desborough's answer is to clasp her in his arms. So Betha creeps away and leaves them thus, to commune with each other's hearts, and patch up the broken past as best they may, between them.

CHAPTER XIII.

'COME!'

A MONTH from this date, there is a grand wedding in one of the most fashionable churches of the metropolis, at which the newly made Lady Desborough is pronounced to be the prettiest bride of the season. And if most of her female acquaintances are false, as they whisper their fulsome compliments on her appearance in the ears of Major and Mrs. Durant, 'her sister the actress' is at least sincere in thinking so. To Betha, the occasion is one of unmitigated pleasure. She has watched Hyacinth closely during the last month, and seen her respect and

esteem for her future husband growing, day by day, until she fully believes that it will culminate in that unalterable attachment which constitutes a true marriage; binding two people firmly together in spite of their mutual failings, and making them one in mind as well as condition.

There is a large number of guests to witness the wedding: the aristocratic connections of Viscount Desborough, and the humbler though no less fashionable friends of Major and Mrs. Durant. And all of them, from the highest to the lowest, ask for an introduction to 'the beautiful and accomplished Miss Selwyn,' and congratulate their host on the possession of such a daughter, saying they feel that her acquaintance is an honour to themselves.

So that Betha is blithe, on her own account as well as her sister's; for it is a true triumph to find that by genius and an honourable life, we can surmount all the

difficulties of an equivocal position. And her satisfaction reaches its climax when, the ceremony being over, Major Durant steps forward to congratulate the bride, and Hyacinth turns from her father to her sister's arms, exclaiming :

'No, no ! Betha first—Betha first ! Kiss me for *her*—my darling second mother, and pray that we may be happy together, and I may make him a good and faithful wife.' And Betha kisses the sweet wet face again and again, whilst a silent pæan of praise rises from her over-charged heart, that she has been allowed thus to fulfil her dying mother's prayer.

It is a good old-fashioned custom to hold up 'Virtue triumphant,' and 'Vice debased,' and it never would have become the custom had there not been truth at the back of it. It would be good for the world occasionally to look into the heart of a man who has never sown for himself those seeds of kind-

ness which spring up in fruits of love, and see what a miserable, empty, hollow place it is. For what is the basis of virtue but love? Show me the man who calls himself pious, and observes all the practices of religion, and yet neither loves his fellow-creatures nor wins their love in return; and I believe I look upon as sure a denizen of hell as any mortal upon earth. Such a man may say he is happy, but he lies. No man has ever been happy in this word without love. Sooner or later his Nemesis overtakes him, the Nemesis of his broken promises, his lost opportunities, his selfish aggrandisements; and he sees Death approach, with no hope that a tear will be shed for him on this side eternity, nor a smile welcome him on the other! The poorest man of all is he who dies unloving and unloved; for if he has never matriculated for the science in this world, it is hardly likely he will commence practising on the angels.

Major Durant's Nemesis begins to make its presence felt upon his daughter's wedding-day. He has always petted Hyacinth in his selfish way, chiefly because her features resemble his own, and it wounds his pride acutely that she should openly turn from his embrace to that of her comparatively unknown sister. It will not be long before he recognises the fact that Nemesis does not depart with the conclusion of that ceremony, but returns to haunt him till the last day of his life. For Lord Desborough is not so much in love with Major and Mrs. Durant as he is with their daughter, and sees but too plainly that it is the force of their evil example and careless training that has led his young wife into the perpetration of so much folly.

From the moment he made up his mind to marry her, therefore, he determined that Lady Desborough should see as little of her parents after marriage as possible. He will

not make his wife unhappy by restriction—far from it; but papa and mamma will only be invited on formal visits to the house of their son-in-law, and Hyacinth is not so fond of their company to render this circumstance displeasing to her.

One by one, all the major's fond illusions of living more with the Desboroughs than at Primrose Hill, will fade away, and he will find himself reduced to settling down for the remainder of his life by the side of a wife who has long since got over her first infatuation for him.

As for Betha, who might have been such a loving solace and comfort to his old age, it is hardly likely her father will care to see much of her. Each time he meets the gaze of those earnest eyes, so painfully like her dead mother's, a ghost from the past rises up to reproach him for his cruelty and neglect of her first-born child, and Betha's presence is a continual accusation to him.

So he will go downhill to his grave, becoming more conscious each year that his children's lives, and joys, and sorrows are things in which he has no part: and the day will come when he will groan in his solitude, and wish that he had died with his first wife, rather than have lived to feel so utterly forsaken and alone. He will ascribe all his misery to his unoffending daughters, and declare that they are ungrateful and undutiful, but no one will believe it but himself. I don't think he is worthy of any pity! He has never been an interesting character! Let us pass on to something else.

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As soon as the clang of the wedding-bells has subsided, and the finery is taken off and laid away, Betha prepares to go down to Buton, whither she despatched Mattie Levison some weeks before.

How many innocent, loving fibs had the girl to tell before she could properly equip

her poor friend for the journey! She was too delicate to say to Mattie: 'I have procured you an engagement at Buton, but you cannot appear there unless you lay yourself under a further obligation to me by accepting an outfit of clothes.'

Betha could not have hinted such a thing to the woman who had been used to five hundred pounds a year for pin-money.

It was hard enough for her even to give the poor creature a present without its appearing to be done out of charity. So one day she took her in her arms, and pillowing the fallen head on her own pure breast, told her a pardonable fiction about every actress requiring an outfit on first joining the profession; and how Mr. Cheyne, like all managers, was quite aware of the fact, and in the habit of making some allowance for it.

'But I shall have to pay him back, then?' said Mattie, innocently.

'Well, no, dear! not exactly,' stammered Betha. 'You see, it is this way. I dare say, under other circumstances, Mr. Cheyne would have given you a higher salary——'

'Oh, Betha!'

'But I told him you would require a stage wardrobe, so you are only to receive two pounds a week, you know; and it will come to the same thing in the end. And I thought, as I have had so much experience in such matters, I had better buy the dresses and linen for you, as you would not know what would be most useful.'

'Oh, thank you, dear, kind Betha!' said Mattie, fully believing that the wardrobe was somehow paid out of her own earnings.

Poor, pretty Mattie was never overburdened with brains in the days gone by, and the companionship of Mr. Geoffrey Clifford had not tended to train her intellectual powers. So she only clung to her friend and was grateful. And when she was at

last safely packed off to the care of Miss Montalambert, looking graceful and lovely as ever in a well-made travelling costume, Betha felt as happy as though she had rescued a nation from destruction. Since which time she has received a letter from her friend Kate, overflowing with enthusiasm about the new arrival, and saying that her face created such a sensation on the first night of her appearance, that 'uncle' had already decided to make her the principal attraction of the coming pantomime. So that Betha, travelling by express to Buton, has reason to congratulate herself on the success of both her missions.

Lady Desborough is with her husband exploring the beauties of Switzerland; and 'Miss Norton' is already a favourite with the 'gods' of Buton. What could an artful little manœuvrer like our heroine wish for more? It is her natural ingratitude, I suppose; but one thought will keep intruding

itself to mar her pleasure. She has neither seen nor heard of Robert Frere since the day they met on the doorstep of Mr. Claverton's chambers.

Betha supposes he may have left London; perhaps have returned to Baron's Court; and be busy with the draining of meadows, or the sowing of mangel-wurzel, or some equally useful but uninteresting detail of country life. Still she thinks he *might* have seen her *once* again before he took his departure, considering how *very* intimate they were in the olden days. So small a courtesy could not have harmed the future Mrs. Frere, whoever she might be!

But there has been no sign of Rob since that day; and Betha sighs as she leans back on the carriage cushion and realises that each mile they travel brings her nearer to his home, and yet she has no clain to enter there.

She is still thinking deeply when the train

runs into Buton Station, and the excited recognition of Kate Montalambert and Mattie Norton makes her realise she has reached her journey's end.

What a different arrival this is from the first! A suite of rooms has been engaged at the principal hotel in the town for 'Miss Selwyn and her party' (for Betha has determined that Kate and Mattie are to be her guests for the month, and enjoy all the good things she can afford to give them); and thither, after a short delay, they proceed together.

Her reception is naturally a cordial one. Miss Elizabeth Selwyn, the fair young actress who created such a sensation in Buton on her *début* as Juliet, is doubly remembered now that she has blossomed into a celebrated artist; and the landlord of the Royal George considers himself very lucky to have secured her patronage.

The manager, Mr. Cheyne, is in the vesti-

bule ready to receive her, backed by the landlord and all the servants of the hotel, to say nothing of a motley crowd who throng about the steps and the adjoining pavement.

The crowd, most of whom have only heard of the fame of the great Miss Selwyn, are rather disappointed to find that the celebrated actress is a slight, fair girl, dressed in a tweed travelling suit, with her golden hair twisted carelessly at the back of her head.

'Lor, is that *she?*' is the general comment. 'I *am* disappointed! Why, there ain't nothin' of 'er! I could take 'er up in my 'and——'

But Betha is quite unconscious of the unflattering criticism she provokes, so happy is she at finding herself amongst her old friends. She is not to play until the following night, however; so after a while, Mr. Cheyne leaves them alone, and the excitement and

bustle die down, and they subside into a trio of confidential women.

Mrs. Potter is, as usual, full of chatter. Six years have neither moderated her enthusiasm for others, nor lowered her opinion of herself. But one terrible secret respecting her lurks out in the course of conversation. She is not yet married again herself, but her son—her 'little boy,' 'mamma's pretty pet'—has done so on his own account, and actually made her *a grandmother!*

'Fancy *me*, dear!' cries Miss Kate, hiding her blushing face with a pretty affectation of horror; 'only fancy, *me* a grandmother! Oh dear! oh dear! it is quite too shocking! I thought I should never hold my head up again when I first heard the dreadful news! I said I would strangle the thing! But it's thriving; and my boy says it will soon say "*Granny.*" If it does, and they bring it in my presence, my dear, it will never leave it alive!'

Betha is infinitely amused at Mrs. Potter's horror at the blushing honours that have been thrust upon her, and she perceives the absurdity of her dismay, and her assumption of youthfulness, much more clearly than she did six years before. She is grateful to Miss Kate for her kindness to her in the past, and her kindness to Mattie in the present, but it is rather a relief when she quits the room.

'And how do you think you shall like your new life, dear Mattie?' inquires Betha, as soon as they are alone.

Mattie is sitting at Betha's feet, with her head in her lap; and as her friend speaks she turns and gratefully kisses her hand.

'Don't do that, dear,' says the other, gently.

'Oh, Betha! I *must!* How shall I ever thank you, darling, for all you have done for me? What other woman would have done the same? And I was so unkind to

you at the last. I said such wicked ungenerous things—they often come back to me now—and yet you came like a good Samaritan, and forgave them all.'

'Hush—hush! Mattie! Please never mention them again, nor think of them even, for I have forgotten them long ago. All I remember is the sweet dear Mattie of Princess College, who always had a kind or consoling word for an unhappy girl whose young life was far too full of care and anxiety. We have both known trouble, dear, and it has bound us fast together. Let us hope that the worst of it is over. Be true to yourself, dear Mattie, in the future—and the last part of your life may be better than the first.'

There are tears in the eyes of both of them as Betha concludes; and they sit silent, wondering over the possible future she has alluded to. If they could foresee it, they would know she is a true prophet; and

looming in the distance, drawn towards Mattie by that inexplicable Fate that arranges all our lives for us, is the fair-haired young clerk who played Lord Darnley to her Queen of Scots, in the *tableaux vivants* at Albert Gate, and who, now turned into a substantial man of business, will some years hence offer his heart as a resting-place for poor Mattie's wounded wings; and let her end her days there — safe and at peace.

* * * * *

It is needless to say that Betha's reception at the old Theatre Royal is all that she could wish for. Buton is not likely to condemn that which has passed successfully through the crucible of London opinion; and Mr. Cheyne thinks, on the first night of her reappearance, that every conservatory in the town must have been stripped for her benefit. The county families from far and wide flock

to see and hear her; the house is crowded from pit to gallery every night; and Mr. Cheyne has made an undeniable bargain in securing her for one hundred pounds a week.

Betha, however, cares little for that. She is pleased, on the contrary, that her kind old manager should have scored a success by her, and that she should have been able to do his theatre a good turn. She is very free and liberal with her money—spending it as fast as she receives it—for this young lady was never given to save a halfpenny that could do good to anyone else. She deluges Kate Montalambert and Mattie with presents and good things, even going so far as to present the former, to her indignation, with a coral and bells for the grandchild. But if she makes her friends' hearts light, her own is rather heavy the while, and neither success nor gratitude has the power to help her shake off the depression, which grows worse instead of better as the days pass on.

She declares to Bentham, and even to herself, that it is the enervating influence of the southern coast that is having an effect on her, and that she shall be all right as soon as she gets up to Manchester and Liverpool. She takes long walks in consequence—generally by herself—and often in the direction of Baron's Court, which lies some fourteen miles away from Buton.

But though the appearance of a horseman in the distance often brings what is termed her heart 'into her mouth,' she never catches a glimpse of Robert Frere, or any of his family. Until one day, at a moment when she least expects it, she comes suddenly upon Lady Frere.

Betha is in the town itself, bent on shopping; and the old lady is in a Bath-chair, drawn by a groom in livery, and accompanied by her confidential maid, Mrs. Barker. As Betha catches sight of her the blood mounts to her face; but she walks on deliberately,

with little idea that she will be recognised. She has not gone, however, many paces beyond Lady Frere's chair, before she hears her name articulated, and Mrs. Barker hurries after her, with a request that she will turn back and speak to her mistress.

'Lady Frere wishes to speak to *me?*' demands Betha in astonishment.

'Yes, miss! if you will be so kind. Her ladyship sent me after you the other day, but you went so fast, I couldn't catch you up.'

Had a thunderbolt fallen at Betha's feet, she could hardly have been more startled; but she obeys the impulses of her breeding, and retraces her steps to the side of Lady Frere.

'Your servant says that you desire to speak to me, madam,' she commences in her haughtiest tone; but as her glance falls on the figure in the Bath-chair, she feels a sudden compunction. Lady Frere is looking

very old and fragile, and the withered hand she extends for the girl's acceptance trembles visibly.

'Yes, Miss Durant, I have wished to see you for some time. I would have called on you had I known your address. It is a long while since we met, Miss Durant—a very long while.'

'Long enough to make one see the hollowness of what the world calls friendship, Lady Frere—and to despise it.'

'Yes, yes!—but I want to ask you something.—John! you can go away; I wish to speak to this young lady, alone. Go out of earshot, John, and don't try to listen; for Barker will be watching you.'

The groom touches his hat, and walks away as solemn as a judge, and then Lady Frere turns anxiously towards Betha.

'Miss Durant! tell me—what has become of our boy? Why won't you let him come back to Baron's Court?'

'My lady—my lady!' interposes Barker, 'had not your ladyship better wait till you can speak to Miss Durant in a less public place.'

For they are stationed in the middle of the High Street of Buton.

'Hold your tongue, Barker! and mind your own business,' replies Lady Frere, peevishly. 'Don't mind her, my dear! She is an impertinent creature, and I have ruined her by indulgence. But tell me the truth! Why does not our Robert come back to Baron's Court?'

'Why should you ask *me* such a question?' replies Betha. 'I know nothing of Mr. Frere's affairs. I have only just returned from America, where I have lived for the last six years.'

The old lady looks puzzled.

'In America for six years!' she repeats slowly. 'Then why should our Robert be working in London like a common man?'

'I did not know that he *was* working in London, madam. I thought he was living with you and his father at Baron's Court. But anyway, *I* have nothing to do with his actions or proceedings.'

'Oh yes, you have!—you have!—and I'll prove it to you. Barker! where is my bag? Give me Master Robert's last letter to his papa. It's very hard upon us, Miss Durant—very hard indeed—with poor Sir Willoughby at death's door, and I so feeble and old, that I can render him no assistance, and Robert, his only child, refuses to live at home—and all on your account—your account.'

'Lady Frere,' says Betha, proudly, 'I do not understand your words. If your grandson refuses to live at Baron's Court, he must have private reasons for doing so, and they do not concern me. I have seen him but once since my return to England, and then quite by accident.'

'But he has always been in love with

you,' says Lady Frere, suspiciously. 'He has never cared for any woman but yourself, and he says that he never shall.'

'I have nothing to do with that,' replies Betha, with apparent indifference, though her heart has begun to beat more rapidly at the mere idea.

'Barker! what a time you are! What are you fumbling about like that for? Didn't you hear me say I wished to see Master Robert's last letter?'

'Yes, my lady—certainly, my lady; but don't you think if your ladyship were to order John to wheel you to a more private place first——'

'Barker! hold your tongue! You're a perfect parrot, and keep on repeating the same words over and over again! You don't mean to deny, Miss Durant, that our poor Robert fell in love with you the very first time he saw you!'

'I do not wish to deny anything, madam!

Mr. Frere was, I believe, attached to me at that period, and we were engaged to each other until the tie became irksome to both of us, and was broken by mutual consent. I hoped and I believed at that time that he would relinquish his occupation in the city, and return to his friends. I never thought it a fit position for him, and I am as innocent of having had a hand in his adopting it, as I am of the other offences your ladyship saw good to lay to my charge.'

'What offences? what charge?' demands Lady Frere, eagerly.

'Your ladyship can hardly have forgotten that when Mr. Frere revealed the fact of my profession, you paid a visit to Mrs. Matthews, and told her your opinion of it, and myself. At all events, *I* have not forgotten what she repeated to me, nor the insult I considered it!'

'Ah, my dear, I was angry at the moment —very angry—and we are not responsible

for what we say in a rage! But if I spoke hastily, I have been punished for it. Six years, my dear! Six long years has our Robert been separated from us, and all on your account! Here is his letter! See what he says, and when I had written to tell him his poor father was so ill that we had been obliged to come into Buton, that he might be nearer his doctor. Just read what Robert says in reply to it.'

And pointing with her shaking finger to a certain paragraph, Betha follows the direction of it, and reads as follows:

'You reproach me with my long absence from Baron's Court, and my determination to work for myself, and you say I am undutiful and unforgiving. My dear father, I am neither, but we view these things in a different light. Six years ago you turned me out of my home for refusing to break my engagement with Miss Durant, and I deter-

mined to make myself independent of your favour, and to work for my future wife. That necessity—God help me!—is over. Our engagement is a thing of the past—but I shall never marry (as I can never love) any woman but herself. Therefore I must still refuse to give up the independence I have created and exist on the parental bounty at Baron's Court. I *live* on the hope—barren as it may be—that some day Miss Durant and I may be re-united. *If* that time ever comes, and it found me unable to offer her a home, I should curse the filial duty that had made me return to your side. You know that it was your refusal to receive her as a daughter that caused the rupture between us. Until that refusal is turned into a ready and willing consent, I prefer to remain in service to Messrs. Mac-Kinnon. Nothing can alter my determination. Were Miss Durant to marry some one else to-morrow, it would be all the same. I shall remain

single for her sake—in case she should ever be free—until the grave has closed over us both.'

As Betha peruses these words and reads all the love in her lover's heart for her—the constant love that has survived indifference, infidelity, and separation—she has to set her teeth close together to prevent the rebellious tears, that have welled up into her eyes, from overflowing her cheeks and betraying her emotion.

She would like to kiss the paper that contains those dear words, and to exclaim aloud how much she loves and thanks the writer. But she stands like a statue instead, with veiled eyes and downcast head.

Lady Frere, meanwhile, leans forward in her chair, and scrutinises the girl's features with eager curiosity.

'What do you think of it?' she asks

anxiously, as Betha's eyes rest on the last word.

'It is a good letter,' says Betha, quietly; 'and a true one, and worthy of your grandson.'

'But you see what he says,' continues the old lady, piteously. 'He won't come back to us. He refuses to live at Baron's Court, whilst his poor father is pining away for a sight of him. He is wanted on the estate and amongst the tenants, and Sir Willoughby is failing fast, and what can a poor old woman like myself do to mend matters! If Robert were back, all would go right again.'

'Lady Frere, what do you want me to do?' demands Betha, in a low voice.

'Barker, go away! Go and look after John,' exclaims the old woman sharply; and as the servant walks demurely on she turns again to Betha, and seizes both her hands. 'Oh, my dear! write to him—write to him

and tell him it is his duty to come back. Robert will come if you tell him to do so. Think of us, my dear. We are old and sick and feeble—his poor old father and me—and have not many years to live in this world! Use your influence with our boy, and bring him back to us.'

'But he says,' replies Betha, struggling with her feelings, 'that he will not return unless you receive me as a daughter, and that, you know, is impossible.'

'Do you dislike him, then?' asks the grandmother, piteously. 'Oh, my dear, don't say that! He is a good boy, for all his obstinacy, and if he has offended you in any way, try to forgive him for our sakes. You are young and beautiful, and I hear you have made a great success, and have the world at your feet; but if you are not otherwise engaged, *do* try to love our boy again, and bring him back to us.'

'But you forget *I am an actress!*' says

Betha, drawing her figure up to its fullest height.

'You are *a Durant*, my dear, and as for the other, what does it signify so long as you love our Robert and will make a good wife to him.'

'Do you mean to say, then, that you would not be ashamed to own to the world that your grandson had married his wife from off the stage?'

'I shall be prouder of you than of anything I have ever known,' cries the poor old lady, with tears standing on her withered cheeks, 'if you will be the good angel in our house, and bring peace and happiness back to my poor son's heart and mine.'

'Then I will write to Rob and try what I can do with him,' replies Betha, as she stoops down and kisses the tears away.

Lady Frere holds her tightly to her breast.

'Come and be my daughter, dear,' she

whispers, 'and forgive me if my old-world prejudices ever induced me to say an unkind word of a profession which is ennobled by your presence.'

* * * * *

'*From Betha Selwyn to Robert Frere.*

'I met your grandmother to-day in the High Street, and she showed me part of your last letter to your father.

'I did not know before that you had not returned to Baron's Court, nor for what reason you refused to give up your occupation in the City. The thought of this, and of what your poor father and grandmother are suffering on your account, has made me very unhappy. Of what consequence are our feelings to theirs, who have so few years left in which to enjoy themselves?

'Rob! pray alter your resolution, and return home to take up your proper position

by their side. I ask it as a favour to myself. Would you make me further responsible for a sin in which you know that I have no part?'

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'*Robert Frere to Betha Selwyn.*

'I must apologise for the delay in answering your letter, which followed me abroad. When it reached me I was in the company of Lord and Lady Desborough. What a charming girl your sister is, and how proud her husband seems of her! She is never tired of talking of you, and all your goodness to her, and in the course of our confidence she related to me a story which, though partially veiled, was sufficient to tell me *why* I met you that morning in the Strand. If I loved you before, how much more do you think I love you now?

'Betha! you say you have read my letter to my father. You know, then, the only

condition on which I will return to take up my residence at Baron's Court. It lies in your power to decide whether I make the last days of my father and grandmother as happy as you wish them to be. Only write the word "*Come!*" and I will be at your feet and in their arms as soon as an express train will take me there.'

* * * * *

'*Betha Selwyn to Robert Frere.*

'*Come!*'

THE END.

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